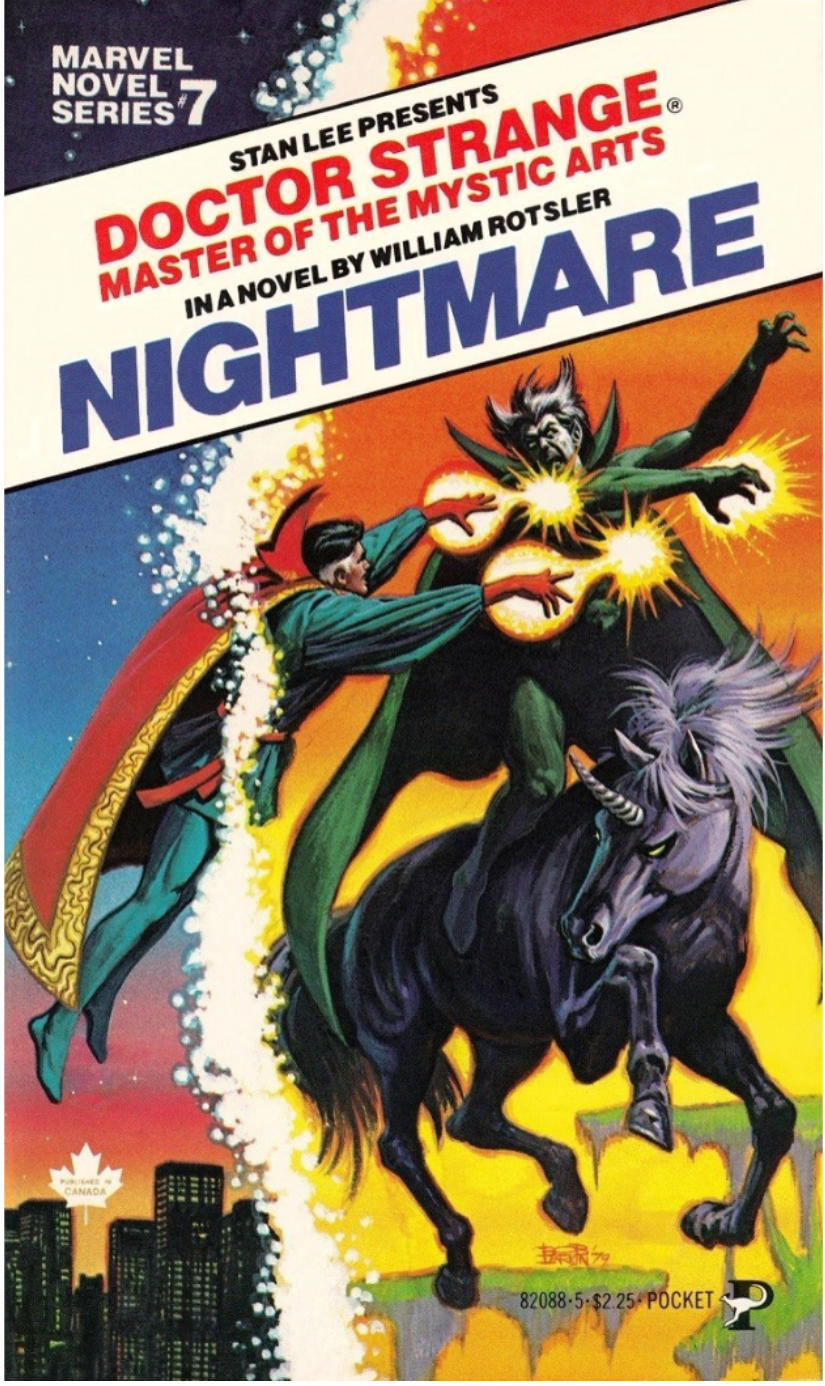
MARVEL NOVEL SERIES #7
STAN LEE PRESENTS
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MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS
IN A NOVEL BY WILLIAM ROTSLER
NIGHTMARE
PUBLISHED IN CANADA
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IN

NIGHTMARE

A soul-chilling tale of terror . . . terror that could be YOURS!

AN INSTANT COLLECTOR'S ITEM: THE SORCERER SUPREME IN HIS FIRST FULL-LENGTH NOVEL!

WHERE WAS HE?

Strange stopped with his back against the cold gray metal wall. Why was he here? He couldn't seem to remember exactly why he had come there. Or who he was, except in a vague, uninterested way. A port opened near him, creating itself out of nothing, and a slender young woman stepped out. Her head was hairless and the top portion of her skull was smooth silver. She glanced at Strange, seemed indifferent, and walked on. She wore snug-fitting clothing and Strange could see the play of her muscles and the sway of her long gray tail.

Tail?

NIGHTMARE

BY
WILLIAM ROTSLER

Packaged and edited by
Len Wein and Marv Wolfman

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P.V.S EBOOK

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For Mark Evanier, who said,
“Does that mean I have to read it?”

One

He flew through the clouds, through wisps of white vapor backlit by the brilliant sun. He did not seem to know how he got there; the reasons and means were vague, but he was there. He felt the wind, the cold of the air in the high reaches, heard the flap of his pajamas, and the music.

He blinked, but the clouds seemed endless. There was no stopping and no ending. He flew through the fringes of cloud after cloud and always new vistas opened up—rose-tinted clouds, steel gray, fluffy white, on and on.

The music grew louder, from a faintly heard whisper to resounding, driving thunder. The clouds parted, the sun's radiance shone forth, and—*no!*

It was not the sun, but something else! An all-pervading shining, a demanding, hypnotic glow . . .

There was something beyond the brilliance . . .

Something—someone—demanding his attention, demanding his will. He could not refuse. Who could refuse God?

It had to be God. Only God could be brighter than the sun.

"Yes, Lord?" asked the Reverend Billie Joe Jacks.

"Billie, wake up!"

"I heard you, Lord. I'm coming!"

"Billie, wake up! You're having a nightmare!"

The clouds darkened and closed in. The brilliance was gone, smothered in the purple, the steel gray, the black.

"What . . . what?"

"Billie, you've had a bad dream," his wife said.

He was sweating and hugged the blankets to him. "It's all right, I'm all right," he said quickly, squeezing his eyes shut. "I'll go right back to sleep."

He tossed and turned for awhile, and his wife Alicia watched with nervous eyes. The nightmares had been getting worse, just the last few nights. He had awakened once shouting quotations from the book of Revelation, and another time he had muttered, over and over, "Yes, Lord, yes, Lord."

She had to do something—and soon.

Joe Peerson was the second rated light-heavyweight contender, a powerfully muscled black man with a notoriously bad temper. He'd killed one man in a prize fight in Atlanta, but he never dreamed about that; nor the mugger he'd punched to death in an alley near the Benjamin Franklin Inn in Philly. What he dreamt about were soft-skinned foxes with slinky shapes, smilers with bright teeth and red lips, the kind who never said no and knew all the tricks. He dreamed about round beds with fur covers, dressed-up Mark IVs with gold trim, a wallet bulging with money in big denominations, and everyone looking at him when he came in.

The punchy fighter he'd cold-cocked had been a setup anyway, not that he'd needed one. He was a fast riser with an iron gut and the ability to keep on punching when he was all but out on his feet. He was going to the top. He never dreamed about the fighter he'd put away.

That is, not until this night.

Bernie Hoberg came into the ring looking twice as big as Joe remembered him—same gray trunks with the double black stripe, same little scar over the left eye, same lopsided grin; only bigger; bigger than Ali, bigger than Foreman. Joe hardly had time to get out of his robe before the ref was calling them forward. The words slid by, often unheard, always ignored. It was Bernie's dead eyes that fixed him.

Dead eyes.

He didn't look quite the same, either—more . . . more diabolic . . . Skin lighter, too, and bigger, always bigger. A *lot* bigger.

The bell rang and dead Bernie came at him fast, chin tucked in, left out—*wham!*

The right came out of nowhere, plowing right through Joe's defenses, sending splinters of light into his mind; but he didn't fall. He

punched back. Every blow hit—a beautiful left-right-left combo.

Nothing.

Bernie ignored the blows as if they were a hooker's praise. His big right fist shot out again, thundering through the smoke and light, to destroy Joe's face. Joe tasted the blood, but he didn't fall. He *couldn't* fall.

Bernie looked odd, very odd. His face was longer, less round, and he seemed to have a mustache. His hair was different, too, with streaks of white along the temples.

Can't be. Cannot *be.* He didn't look like dead Bernie Hoberg at all. His clothes were all wrong—red and purple, black and . . .

Clothes?

The fists hit him, hurt him, drove him back, but he couldn't fall. Hands were clutching at him, pulling at him. Hey, no fair holding me while I get punched out. We did that when we were kids—laying out the Warriors or the Silver Knights—but not in the ring. Maybe they'll stop the fight if someone is interfering.

Please stop the fight, he thought. I can't take much more of this! The big dude with the wicked grin is tearing away my face!

"Joe!"

"Huh? Whut?"

"Joe, hey, come out of it! Stop that!"

He blinked. He was sitting up in bed with the two sisters on either side, holding his arms. "Hey, baby, come to momma," Doreen said, hugging him.

"Bad dream, huh?" Noreen asked.

"Never mind," he grunted. He didn't want to answer any questions. He took Doreen in his arms and felt Noreen against his back, caressing him. But before his mind's eye was the image of the fighter, the guy with the silver at his temples and the piercing eyes—mocking eyes—that made Big Joe Peerson feel small. Joe Peerson didn't like feeling small.

"Joe, honey, you're hurting me!" Doreen gasped.

"And you like it," he snarled.

Gray people roamed the gray streets. He walked among them, stark naked, trying to look unconcerned. The gray faces stared at him. They all knew him, every one, even when he had forgotten their faces. Tom Jaybrook, the trouble-making executive, he was there, looking, his dead mouth slack. Dave Wray, the other side's best hit man, he was there, only someone had put his head back on. Scott Ridgeway, Mister

Big himself—only there had been someone else who wanted that title, someone who had sent $25,000 in the mail . . . Clair Gerber, who had been too greedy in Chicago, and McQuade, who had skimmed off the top in Vegas . . .

Dead faces.

Dead faces looking, following, coming at him . . . He bumped into them. Christy Kerri, the headline stripper who had seen too much . . . The biker, Don Foster, who'd gone down hard and needed an extra slug . . . the don himself, Rico Curson, with his faint smile and cold heart . . . The don had sent him after Sakai and Strobl and Phillips . . . The bomb in the car, the poison in the pasta, the van over the cliff. They were all dead.

But they walked the streets, gray and staring. They followed him, said nothing, only stared. The buildings, gray and black, stared down with blank, black rectangular eyes. There was only one spot of color, only one thing that moved faster.

Red, purple, a white face, black hair . . . a red cape . . .

A *cape?* What the blazes was this?

Fear held an unreasoning grip on his mind. It was *him*—the nameless him that he knew would someday come.

Retribution. Revenge. Death.

It was death coming, sent by someone else, some nameless figure of distant power, pulling at the fragile strings of his life.

Death.

Death with a mustache, death with a red cape, death with piercing black eyes, death reaching out—

"Uh!" He sat up, choking, feeling the cold white fingers around his throat. His hands tore at the ghostly fingers, found nothing and tore at the bedclothes. He staggered out, tipping over an expensive, flat leather case. He lurched to the curtains and yanked them open. Staring out he saw the Holiday Inn sign, lurid and Las Vegasy, and the parked cars with the Virginia licenses sprinkled among all the others from everywhere. The cars went by on the street. A gas station sign revolved farther down. Someone honked. A truck rumbled by, dotted with running lights.

He turned back into the room. What a hell of a dream! He reached down and picked up the flat leather case and sat on the bed with it across his knees. His trembling fingers took two tries before he could unlatch the case. He tilted the lid open and checked the contents carefully.

The rifle was broken down. The powerful scope was fastened permanently to the main housing and had been sighted in at one

hundred yards. The stock and barrel were lying in their own padded niches in the custom case. The handmade .270 cartridges were in a special plastic ammunition box in its own niche. They were all hollow-point slugs. There were twenty of them, but Phil Zuber didn't think he'd need more than one—two at the outside.

He lifted out a small, special plastic box from a niche. It only held eight rounds, but they were extra-special rounds. Dipped in cyanide, with explosive heads, they were his specials. If he ever saw the guy in the cape in real life, he'd use one of these—and he'd do it for free. It would be the first time he would kill for nothing. But it would be worth it—to kill death. He had to laugh, but the laugh didn't last very long.

Bel Air is the Beverly Hills of Hollywood. It spreads over thickly wooded hills and valleys north of the University of California at Los Angeles. Here a million-dollar home is something of an embarrassment. A million five, two point three, and even higher are common enough prices. Although best known for the residences of the superstars of motion pictures and television, there are many estates of more normal multimillionaires who gained their loot in more conventional businesses. Lately, record stars, even record *producers,* even—God forbid—superstar *agents,* have sought addresses in these sacrosanct acres. There, too, Michele Hartley, had her home.

From one window of one of the maid's rooms, over the four-car garage, you could just get a glimpse of Pickfair, the legendary home of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Mary Pickford. To Hollywood society Pickfair is something like Windsor Castle to English nobility.

But Michele Hartley didn't like views. If she could see out, other people could see in. For nine years Michele Hartley had not been able to go anywhere without people staring, without them coming up and bothering her, without eager fans coming over the walls, into the house, appearing, crowding in, smothering her.

Trees surrounded her estate completely, and outside the small forest was an eight-foot wall topped with broken glass. The house had originally been built for a silent-movie latin lover and it was said most of the bottles that supplied the glass atop the walls had been supplied by W.C. Fields. Douglas Fairbanks was supposed to have rescued a kitten from the apex of the steep roof. Ben Hecht was supposed to have written a story in the dining room. John Barrymore had got drunk there, and caught cold lying on the lawn under the stars, reciting Shakespeare. Errol Flynn had seduced all three maids employed at the time, legend said. Bogart had broken the front window having a fight with his first wife, Mayo. Erich von Stroheim

had shaved his head in the second-floor bathroom. Vilma Banky, Theda Bara and Barbra Streisand had all danced there. Gloria Swanson had planted a small garden of spices there for the original owner. Tom Mix had ridden Tony onto the lawn with Christmas gifts for the daughter of the owner. A couple of stars had been shot up there; another had died in bed there—the wrong bed—and been taken away in the middle of the night. It was that kind of house.

Michele had made over the "Colleen Moore" bedroom into the "Michele Hartley" bedroom, and it became the main story in two national magazines. She promptly started plans for redecoration; the original job had served its purpose.

She lay in the pink-satin and fourteen-karat-gold-fixtured bedroom, afraid to go to sleep. It was nothing new. She'd always been afraid. That was why the bedside table had a drawer full of sleeping pills from four doctors.

Sleep brought either nothingness—or terror.

Memories surfaced all too easily in her dreams. In dreams, she was not the magnificently built sex goddess of the silver screen, but Rayette Milkenberg, the skinny kid with pimples and an impossible dream. Asleep she was vulnerable. Instead of the ninth most bankable female star, she was broke, hungry, scared, just as it had been when she'd run away at fourteen. At night, even in her plush home, guarded by the Bel Air patrol and two on-duty security guards, she was running.

Michele Hartley hated to sleep. "Let's stay up until dawn!" was what she always said, even at bad parties. Sleeping in the day wasn't quite as bad, somehow—or sleeping outside by the pool, in the bright and expensive Bel Air sun. But the studio didn't like her too tanned—not her style, they said—which is perhaps why the former Rayette Milkenberg sought out handsome young actors to sleep with, as often as possible. They wanted something, of course, and she knew it, but that was all right. Everyone wanted something. They wanted her flesh, the expertness of her renowned techniques, but they also wanted *access.* If they were good—very, very good—she'd take them to parties. "Oh, L.J., this is Craig Patton; he'd be just marvelous in that new whatsis series you're doing." Or, "Luana, darling, what you are eating up with your eyes is Rod Masters, who is much too good to play opposite you, but he *does* like kinky stuff, so he might do quite well."

Opportunity—she provided opportunity. Meanwhile, the young studs gave her a good time, gave her a good workout. You slept so much better when you were tired, she often said. Sometimes you didn't dream at all.

But tonight there was no one. A beautiful new male starlet with tremendous shoulders and probably other assets, had gotten an attack of flu. Even a *hint* of disease sent Michele scurrying away, so she was alone. Too late to go through the little black book—too proud as well . . . She waited for a phone call, but the only calls she got were from Andre in Paris, Ron in Palm Springs, and Ramon in Puerto Vallarta—plus her agent, who still wanted her for *Pirates of Tortuga.* "There's going to be a pirate trend, mark my words. This science-fiction thing can't last forever, not as long as they shoot westerns in space. You can't trade a six-gun for a ray gun and a horse for a spaceship and expect to have people dig it for science fiction, no sir. You do this and maybe we'll start a trend. Universal will go for the package if you're the star, baby."

She'd promised to think about it. The script still lay unread by the bed, along with seven others. A remake of *Beau Geste* set in Vietnam. A rip-off of *Star Wars* called *Spaceship 2000.* A combination of *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Iron Horse,* with just a *touch* of *Taxi Driver.* The life story of Sigmund Freud told from the point of view of his wife. A remake of *Rio Lobo* with her playing the John Wayne part as a lady sheriff. A sexy one, *Hellfire Club,* to be shot in England, with Sean Connery as Sir Francis Dashwood. ("Sean's reading it, baby, he loves it. He'll give us an answer next week sure.") A Felliniesque version of Hollywood by a "brilliant new filmmaker" who was twenty-four.

Western Costume had two entire racks with her name on them, filled with sexy blouses, low-cut gowns, belly-dancer bras, guerrilla-girl shirts and look-good-when-wet T-shirts. The sexy parts paid well, got her publicity, a block of high-rent property in Dallas, another in Inglewood, an office building in Chicago, two thousand sheep in Wyoming, a condominium in Santa Monica, a safe-deposit box full of blue-chip stocks, and two Jaguars. But she wondered just how long that famous sexy look would last. Maybe she should go back to Evanier—he'd write a great comedy for her; or Thomas—he had plans for a very good drama. Change the image. Plan for the future.

What future? she thought.

Like so many other beautiful women, Michele Hartley thought she would die young. Like the others she did not want to face that day when the beauty would fade—or worse, crumble . . . not even shade gracefully into genteel middle age. She wouldn't let that happen. She'd go the way of Marilyn and the others who seemed to be on top of the world and who took the dark door out.

That's why there were always a lot of sleeping pills in the drawer. At least the corpse would look good. Pistols and high jumps were so messy—just drift away.

Into a dream?

Michele tried to stay awake, but she knew she'd fail. All her props were gone. She'd left her vibrator running and the batteries were dead. She didn't have a good book. Johnny Carson was on reruns and guest hosts. The Late, Late Show was one of hers and she hated it. She remembered how she had gotten the job.

She flopped her arms down helplessly on the covers. The bed squeaked. It was Lon Chaney's bed, they said—senior, not junior. The Man with a Thousand Faces they called him in silent-movie days. They'd called her The Woman who Launched a Thousand Press Releases once. What imaginations the PR people had. They could make something out of nothing.

Michele sighed. *She* was something out of nothing. It wasn't that she believed her press notices, it was that she thought they were the reality and she nothing.

Sleep came slowly, like a long George Stevens dissolve.

Dolly in. Michele Hartley asleep. Fade out.

Fade in.

Exterior; day; enormous parking lot. Cars parked so close together you couldn't get in. As far as the eye could see—dusty car tops in every color. She wandered through the narrow passages between. Where *was* her car? She couldn't find it. She *had* to find it. She had to get away. Her legs felt weak, but she went on.

She stopped to lean on a hood. It was cold; the hood was cold. Her hand left no mark in the dust. She staggered on, her knees still weaker. Within a few steps she could not walk. She fell, clutching her purse. The sun glinted off hundreds of bumpers and windshields. Nothing moved. She tried to cry for help but no sound came. She began to fall forward, into the dust, and she closed her eyes.

She fell.

And fell.

Her eyes popped open. She was still falling, only it was space. Long lumpy arms of rock arched this way and that, with stars and blackness beyond. On some of the arms of thick lumpy rock were little estates—mansions with gardens, fountains, columns, and carefully shaped shrubbery. There was a Greek temple. Below was a Roman villa. Over there was something that looked like Cher's house. There was a castle above her, flying strange flags. Uh-oh. A hut over there, made of reeds and mud; log cabin; a yurt.

She fell.

The falling didn't bother her. It was a dream; she knew it was a dream. Falling in dreams was nice. It meant something, like

everything in a dream is supposed to mean something, but she didn't care—not then, anyway.

She came down, light as a feather, on the lawn of a huge English estate. They set the dogs on her. She shrugged and shoved off the six-hundred-year-old lawn and floated up. She could see people down in the Roman villa. They sent a Rolls for her.

The Rolls turned gracefully in the sky and came at her with only a faint purring. The guy who drove Banacek around was driving. She got in and they drove down to the Roman villa where she got out, still clutching her purse. She seemed to have lost all her clothes somewhere, but the hosts pretended not to see.

Her hosts were David Niven and Deborah Kerr, at least at first, but somehow they became Myrna Loy and William Powell, who set Asta on her. She ran across the lawn, with the yapping dog in hot pursuit, until she came to the green hedge that bordered everything. She couldn't find an opening, so she plunged through, scratching herself, and—

—fell into space.

There was no comforting maze of thick rock arms. That was all above her now. She was going to fall and fall until there was no more of her.

"My purse!" she cried. It had disappeared, too. Everything important was in the purse. She could not have lost her *purse,* not the purse.

Naked, she fell. She screamed, but there was no sound.

Dissolve.

"Hello, I'm your friend."

It was a wood-paneled den. Brass lamps with green shades on a sturdy, boxy desk. Paintings guaranteed not to create trouble. Waxed wood. Books in leather bindings, ten and twelve in a set. On the desk a small bronze cannon, a pen set, a bottle of blood, a paperweight. The windows were masses of little diamonds set in thick wood. Very English, very reassuring, except that beyond the windows the view changed every time she looked.

New York skyline, country barn, Devil's Tower with an oil refinery landing on it, trees and grass, 1920s street . . .

The man in the padded leather chair smiled at her. He was tall, handsome, conservatively dressed, a little silver at the temples, honor fraternity key on his watch chain, inch of crisp linen showing at the cuff—a young Walter Pidgeon, a contemporary Stewart Grainger, a future Roger Moore.

"Hello? You all right?"

"Uh, yes. Where am I?"

He smiled. White teeth, even tan, merry glint, nice lighting. "In your dream, of course."

"I . . . uh . . . *my* dream?"

He smiled and nodded, templing his fingertips before his face and looking kindly at her.

"It seems, uh, so real."

She didn't look at the windows. No one commented on her being nude.

"Of course, that is because it *is* real. Here." He smiled apologetically. "I hope you don't mind if I intrude. You and I have some business to transact, you see."

"See my manager."

"No, I'm afraid you don't understand, Miss Milkenberg."

"Ms. Hartley," she said, frowning.

He smiled. "I'm sorry, you never actually made it legal, you know. Sorry about that, but I'll compromise, *Ms.* Milkenberg." He touched some sheets of paper and shoved them across the polished top of the desk. "We don't have much time, actually. You normally awaken around dawn, I believe—no doubt due to all those years of early calls." He smiled again. "Such a fantastic career. Well, we've got to get on with this. Please read these and sign."

"My agent and my manager are the ones who—"

"Ms. Milkenberg!" His voice cracked sharply and his smile disappeared. "I don't have much time! I'm offering you a straightforward participation contract. Neither your agent nor your business manager can enter into this—nor can your stock broker, security guards, maids, press agent, or hairdresser. Now I do not want to be nasty, but I really *do* have to run along."

Outside one window there was a huge face, enormous and hairy. She blinked. It was the South Seas, with waving palms.

"Mister, uh . . ."

"My name is not important. Sign."

"I do not sign without my—"

"Sign!"

"No!" She glared back. The windows flickered with lightning, then rain; then she saw cliffs and a dark, surging sea.

He sat back, templing his fingers again. "Very well." He shrugged. "I had hoped we could do this in a businesslike manner, Ms. Milkenberg." He made a gesture of helplessness, then pressed a button.

A paneled door opened and in came a handsome man in a blue tunic and tights, wearing a red cape. He, too, had silver at his temples, but wore a small handsome mustache. His eyes were hypnotic and she found she could not move. He came to her, his eyes roving over her nudity; then he reached for her.

They did things in the dream, terrible things, and the view from the windows changed—volcanoes . . . rearing horses . . . flames . . . racing clouds.

Somewhere in the middle of it she realized she was getting no pleasure from it, that she would never again find pleasure in it, not until she signed. The creature behind the desk smiled and handed her the papers. She signed them on her hands and knees, then fell forward.

And fell . . .

And fell.

Two

On the quiet street in New York's Greenwich Village, several people glanced up at the tall brownstone with the round skylight and picked up the pace of their walking. No one said anything, no one avoided the building, but everyone walked just a bit faster to get past. They were quieter, too, as were the automobiles. No trucks seemed to come down this block. No one knew why and truck drivers, if they had been asked, would have said something about better routes or shorter distances. No street people hung out here, no dope pushers stood in doorways, no prostitutes sauntered. It was a quiet street, but those in the neighborhood had heard rumors.

Mrs. Hescox, in the house next door, said she felt very safe—strangely safe for one living in New York—though there *had* been a number of strange sounds in the night, odd lights, things seen in the sky; but it was best to let these things be.

Mr. Ellefson, across the street and south a bit, had a very sensitive nose and he often said the most peculiar odors came from that direction sometimes, usually at night. Incense, he said, but he couldn't pin down the exact origin.

Seven blocks to the east, in a shabby apartment filled with nineteen TV sets, four microwave ovens, six radios, five hi-fi sets, three eight-track players and two videotape recorders, a burglar by the name of Morris Hoppe sat watching *Casablanca* with his hands in his lap. The hands were bandaged heavily and his girl friend had to punch the buttons on the VHS recorder for him.

Morris flexed his hands and groaned. It had been a full week since he had tried to get into that old brownstone and his hands *still* hurt. Funny thing, they weren't burned, but they *felt* burned. Must have

been some kind of electrical short. He'd gone in from the roof next door and had tried to force open the edge of the skylight. Next thing he knew he was two blocks away, on the street, running like mad with his hands on fire. Best to stay away from that place after this, he thought. Plenty of other spots to hit. Some fancy artsy-fartsy loft over on Second Avenue, maybe. Anything but that joint in the Village.

In that old brownstone Doctor Stephen Strange sat in the cross-legged lotus position and meditated. Wong, his Tibetan servant, drifted like smoke through the adjacent room, giving his master an expressionless glance. He carried the tray into the library and set it down near the robed figure of Clea. She looked up from the thick book she was studying and smiled at Wong.

"Thank you. Um, that coffee smells delicious, Wong."

The servant bowed slightly and made no comment. He started to turn away but Clea stopped him. The beautiful young woman brushed back her silver hair and tugged the robe tighter. It was early morning and she had dressed only in the thick robe.

"Wong, when Stephen rejoins us, we'll have breakfast here. I want to show him something."

"Very well, Miss Clea." The Oriental bowed and left. Clea reopened her book and picked up the cup of coffee.

The ancient script was hard to read and the thick parchment pages rustled when she turned them. Each page was illuminated or had a representational drawing, or both. The book was one of the four known copies of the *Necronomicon* and it had always amused her that there was a concentrated effort to make laymen believe the book did not exist, had never existed, and that if it had existed, all copies had been destroyed long ago by a witch-hunting church.

She sipped at the hot liquid and her brow furrowed in concentration. She had been studying with Stephen Strange for some years, but could never seem to catch up. That didn't bother her, for Dr. Stephen Strange was the Sorcerer Supreme and she had no ambitions in that direction. But she did want to become proficient in the arts, and study was essential.

Correction, she thought, *understanding* was essential, whether there was study or not. Stephen, for example: he rarely consulted a book these days, but rather consulted himself. His daily meditations took him into unexplored territory, sometimes with surprising and innovative results. Trained as a medical doctor, Stephen Strange still approached the forces of magic in the same way he would have approached processes and technology in the physical world—systematically and scientifically. It left few pockets of knowledge unplumbed, few areas untested.

But in the past week or two she had felt a withdrawing, an enforced isolation. Clea did not take it personally. Although she was his lover as well as his student, she understood his responsibilities and the drives which made him act and search and respond to various psychic impulses. He *sensed* evil; she knew it, although he had said nothing. She, as a result, made no demands upon him, either as lover or student, and left him to pursue the faint wisp of warning that had somehow come to his attention.

He would return to her when it was time. He always had.

Three

In Los Angeles, California, the Reverend Billie Joe Jacks looked at the clock with a growing apprehension. Nine P.M. Bedtime in an hour at the soonest, two hours at the outside. He was an early-to-bed, early-to-rise man, rock solid, dependable. His congregations sensed that, even over what he called "the electronic pulpit."

It was the only way to reach enough people these days. Television was the only way, the *only* way. You preach the same sermon to a hundred or two hundred in one church—three or four hundred if you are really lucky—and on television, that same identical sermon reaches thousands, *millions*.

His new church was designed around the television camera and he was right proud of it. There were no cameras lugged in and plopped down, with ugly black cables snaking around, tripping the parishioners. No, sir, not at the Temple of Light there wasn't. This was the Age of Television and you might as well understand that.

No, sir, there were little rooms hidden away, with only small slits showing; built-in mikes; body mikes, too, so he could walk among the people. Shoot in any direction and you'd not see a single camera. The lighting he'd had put in by one of the gaffers from a major studio, the sound system by the best he could find. Everything went to a control room and was put on tape. Cassettes were duplicated and sent all over the world by a fast, well-organized group of well-paid professionals.

Of course, he didn't stay in the Temple of Light all the time. He traveled, just like Billy Graham and Oral Roberts and all them others did. Madison Square Garden, the Superbowl, the Astrodome, the London Palladium, Riverfront Stadium. You needed more than just

old-time religion these days. He told that quite freely to the reporters. You needed a gimmick, and the gimmicks had to change, move with the times.

He always laughed and said, "First you have to get their attention," referring to the old joke about hitting the mule with the two-by-four. That's why he'd skydived and scubaed and broadcast from a mile over the desert and from a hundred fathoms down—gimmicks, attention-getters.

Nine-oh-five.

He didn't want to go to bed, yet . . . Yet . . . something drew him. There had been something frustrating about that dream. He'd come so close to God. He knew it was God. What else *could* it be?

Billie Joe Jacks shrugged and brought his attention back to the couple from South Gate who were talking about his beautiful laser light show the week before.

But still . . . if it wasn't the Almighty calling, who—what—could it be? It was too bad the way people felt about television preachers these days. All those television shows about corrupt ministers, that *disaster* down in South America, the disrepute the ministry was falling into. And it wasn't just the Protestant churches either. A bishop—a *bishop!* —of the Greek Orthodox Church had been discovered in a porn film! And the rumors in the Roman Church about an autopsy on Pope John Paul the First. People just weren't taking things on faith, anymore.

Maybe that was a good idea for a sermon—the loss of faith in the electronic age. Maybe he could find something about moral corruption in Revelation and apply it to the present world. Have to get Zekley and Harris on that right away. They did some of his best corruption speeches.

Nine-ten.

He chewed at his lip. "Yes, indeed, Mrs. Armstrong, it *was* an expensive demonstration of laser technology, but it only shows the beauty of the Lord, don't you think?"

Maybe if he had some coffee he'd not go to sleep so quickly. Or use those sleeping pills; knock himself out . . .

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Armstrong; this is *indeed* generous of you. Here, let me give you one of our Swords of Light. They're reserved for our, um, special parishioners—and one for you, Mrs. Armstrong. No, it is *we* who thank *you.* Bless you, my children."

Nine-eleven.

Joe Peerson lay face down on the tumbled bed. Booze and a good snort had put him out. A dissatisfied Beatrice Marx sat up smoking,

occasionally giving the sleeping giant a hard look. Maybe after he sleeps it off a bit, she thought, maybe he'll be interested again.

It was a new motel, yet the same—left-hand instead of right-hand room was the only difference. Bedspread golden instead of brown—only difference. He lived his life out in bland anonymous rooms, but it was all right. It was what he deserved. That and the money in the safe-deposit boxes in Kansas City, LA, Flushing, and Houston. After this job he'd open a box in Chicago. What name would he use?

Mark Evans was Houston. Evan Marx was Flushing. KC was E. Marks and LA was M.A. Kevans. Chicago . . . Mark E.—what? What street was he on? Croft? No, he might forget that. Mark E. What was he registered as here? Mark Evans? All right, Mark Evans, Junior. What difference did it make? As long as he could remember which name went where, and as long as he had ID to match. But identification was rarely a problem.

He stretched out in the bed. Odd dream last night. Don't need any more like that. Not before a job.

The details of his assignment went through his head. *Carolyn Kirby, age twenty-five, 1529 West Sapra, Los Angeles. Apartment Eight. Must look like an accident.* He'd have to research her first. What would be a "logical" accident for her?

The *why* of it never bothered him. The why was $10,000, five in front, five after, all through Collado the contact. People were vermin, anyway. What difference did it make one more or less? Doing the overpopulated world a good turn. He vaguely wondered if she was good-looking; that always helped. Good-looking women had a lot of people sore at them, for one reason or another, or they committed suicide a lot. Maybe a rape-murder, but that was always tricky. Took time, too many chances of things going wrong. He didn't get any kick out of it, anyway; never did—even paying for it. Or maybe *especially* paying for it. What did it matter, anyway . . . ?

. . . dumb dame getting herself in trouble with someone . . .

. . . stupid . . .

. . . gray walls . . .

. . . gray horse, galloping . . .

. . . man, man with long green cape . . .

. . . *cape?*

. . . no, not the same man, a different one, his face in shadow, shaggy, unkempt gray hair . . .

. . . only the eyes, burning eyes.

. . . long lance, burning tip—sparkling tip. A wand, like a damned

fairy godmother, only—

. . . words . . .

. . . Words were coming through the gray mist, words puncturing his mind, driving into him like nails . . .

You will obey.

You will obey *me*.

I control you.

I control your dreams.

You must sleep, and when you sleep, I control you.

I control you when you are awake.

I.

I, the one who in your dimension they call . . .

. . . The word, the name blurred and drifted in the sleeper's mind . . .

. . . Could the name have been Nightmare?

. . . gray . . .

. . . He controls . . .

. . . He is powerful, but he is not Death. Death wears a red cape, with—

DEATH!

The red-caped figure was there, a diabolic entity, the cape swirling in the wind. The gun bucked in the sleeper's hand, the sound explosive and harsh. The blue clothing of Death impacted with the slugs, but the figure did not fall. He advanced.

The hit man ran screaming from the dream and found himself quivering in the corner of the motel room, the bedclothes dragged off, the black leather case knocked down.

The wide-eyed man lunged for the .357 Smith and Wesson in his suitcase, whipped it out and backed into the corner, where he slid to the floor, eyes staring.

Nightmare, it was all a nightmare.

No.

He nodded to himself. No, it was not a nightmare.

It was *Nightmare*.

Four

Joe Peerson tossed and turned on the bed. Beatrice Marx looked hopeful and snubbed out her nineteenth cigarette. But the prizefighter just grunted and made a series of little *uhs* and *ohs*. Lord only knows what he is dreaming about, she thought. The big match, she supposed. Damn his trainer, anyway. After next week, no more hanky-panky. Going into training, he said. No women, no booze, no nose candy, no nothing except hard work for six weeks. This could be her last night with him. God knows you almost have to book yourself in advance, she thought with an expression of distaste. If they only knew in Philadelphia what she did on her little trips. She always returned aglow. "Lost weight, haven't you?" Adele always said with a smug smile. If the bitch only knew *how* Beatrice Marx lost weight she'd explode!

Except tonight—no weight lost tonight. What was he dreaming about?

The ring was huge. Still a ring, ropes and everything, but *big*. Some kinda audience out there in the dark, breathing, waiting. The champ was going to come in. He sensed it before he heard the noise, the cheers. The champ.

He came down the aisle with a spotlight on him. Couldn't see the people, but he saw the champ. Wore a red cape, had blue trunks, had that hair combed up with the silver streaks on the side. Old for a champ, but undefeated—maybe undefeatable.

He came through the ropes, ignoring him. Psych-outs don't work, Joe Peerson thought, only fists. The ref was a big guy, and he too wore a cape, a green cape. Well, ya gotta have a gimmick. The ref was out to make a rep, that was all. He touched gloves with the champ,

only the champ didn't have boxing gloves, only pale hands. You can't do that, Joe thought. Hey, ref, lookit there!

But the ref didn't hear and the bell sounded and the champ was hitting him, one-two-three, *pow,* hurt. The champ's eyes were burning, burning, hot and angry. It wasn't fair. The champ's punches hurt—bone on flesh—but his were padded, ineffective. He looked at the ref, but the ref was laughing, his unkempt gray hair shining in the light, his face shadowed, though the eyes glowed.

Eyes, laughing at him, humiliating him . . .

The champ reared back, his fist cocked. There was nothing he could do to stop it. He was helpless. The fist came at him, pale and hard, and exploded him right out of the dream.

"Well, I never—!"

There was a woman in his bed, grasping at the blankets to cover her pale nakedness. Joe Peerson stared at her wildly. He didn't know who she was, but she was a woman, and he needed a woman. He needed to forget.

But even as she gasped under him, a wide smile on her face, even as he took out his fear and fury on her, he knew he could not forget the dream.

The nightmare.

Billie Joe Jacks was swept up, up through the roof of his temple, right through the $267,000 stained-glass tower, right past the $9,700 bronze cross, leaving behind the $3,240,000 Temple of Light and going upward, outward into the darkness of space.

The carefully tended fringe garden dropped away, the 2,450-car parking lot and the little building where the collectors kept their roller skates became small and distant. The cross-shaped building dwindled until it was an ornament and obscured by a cloud.

Higher . . . higher than the clouds. Into space. Into the night of God and the myriad of His wonders. Into the realm of reality where only dreams were real.

How did he know that? Was that in the Scriptures?

No, he knew it because a voice told him so. A voice? A voice like those heard by Saint Joan? Was this a space-age revelation, an atomic-age miracle? He, Billie Joe Jacks?

No.

There was a voice in his mind.

I have selected you, the voice said. You have access and command attention.

Billie Joe beamed. Yes, that was true. One of his favorite points to make was that even the Lord Jehovah had to burn a bush to attract the attention of Moses. You had to have a gimmick.

I will use you, the voice said.

Yes, Lord, Billie Joe replied, his heart bursting with pride. He, Billie Joe Jacks, had been selected—not Billy Graham, not Oral or Bob or any of that bunch; not even the *Pope! He,* Billie Joe!

You are a door, the voice said.

I am a door, I am a way. I am—

You are mine. I control you, I am . . . *Nightmare!*

Five

Clea looked up from the desk littered with scrolls. She smiled at Stephen Strange and lifted her cheek for a kiss, but her eyes studied him carefully.

"What is it, Stephen?" she asked softly. The scrolls rolled back noisily as her hands left them. Incense flowered the air of the paneled room as Dr. Strange walked to a high-backed chair and sat down. The tips of his fingers touched the side of his face and he stared into the fireplace almost sightlessly.

Clea almost gave up expecting an answer and was about to return to her study of the scrolls of Amarkand when Strange spoke.

"Something is going to happen."

Clea searched his face for a clue, but found none. He seemed thoughtful, so she did not intrude. Instead, she leaned a shapely hip against the dark oak desk and fingered the ornate medallion hung between her full breasts. The crimson robe she wore parted and a leg of great beauty and shapeliness protruded. She did not intend to distract Stephen Strange with any display of sex, and indeed, knew that no such exhibition—whether accidental or deliberate—would interfere with his thinking when he was in this mood. Stephen Strange was a man all right, with a man's desires and feelings, but there were times when he was just above such things as physical pleasure.

"I have felt . . . something . . . for a fortnight," he said. Clea nodded

in agreement. That much had been obvious. But what?

"An old adversary . . . I feel it, yet I do not know which one." In Clea's mind there were a host of possibilities, each more deadly and powerful than the last.

"An *old* adversary?" she asked.

Stephen Strange looked up at his lovely companion. Her stark white hair framed a lovely and eternally young face. Her figure was superb and even the loose crimson folds of the casual robe could not conceal its lushness. But he saw her more as a woman personified, a female perfected, than as a sexual object at that moment. His face was creased with concern and thought.

"I feel . . . that it is someone from years ago. I don't know why. A feeling."

"Could it be . . . Dormammu?"

Strange shook his head. "No, your uncle, the dread Dormammu, is sealed in his dimension. Nor is it the Demon. Zota. Baron Mordo . . ."

Strange's voice trailed off into a whisper. Baron Mordo. There *was* an ancient enemy all right. The memory of Mordo and his early conflicts came back to Stephen Strange, and the memory of the man that Strange had once been came with it.

It was not a memory that brought pleasure to Stephen Strange, but he forced himself to relive it. Perhaps in the memory of those times he might find a clue to the present troubles.

Dr. Stephen Strange had been a surgeon then, a brilliant and renowned surgeon, acclaimed and acknowledged as a medical man. But as a *man,* as a person, he was almost universally despised. Even those who acknowledged his brilliance could not stand him. He was arrogant, ruthless, cold, haughty, proud, and greedy. His fees rose as his fame rose, the arrogance feeding on the fame.

"The operation was a success, Doctor," Dr. Ziegler had said to him after a surgical procedure that was later written up in all the medical journals. "Your patient wants to thank you."

"I can't be bothered," Strange had said, pulling off his surgical gown and reaching for his cigarettes. "Just be sure he pays his bill." He stuck an imported cigarette in his mouth and walked out, leaving Dr. Ziegler behind with a slowly mounting fury.

"To him, the problems of others mean less than nothing," Ziegler muttered angrily.

Outside the OR was a group of doctors from an upstate research facility. "Doctor Strange, I'm Doctor Siegel, these are Doctors Patten, Mayer and Christensen—"

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

"Doctor Strange, we need your help on our new research project—"

Strange turned away with a disdainful expression. "Sorry, I am not interested in charity work."

"But with your skill, your knowledge," pleaded Dr. Siegel, "we might be able to find a cure for—" Strange walked toward the elevators, putting on his hat. "Wait! Come back!"

"When you are willing to pay me for my talent," he said coldly, "I will listen. Not until then. Good day!"

Strange remembered the feeling of smug satisfaction he felt going down in the elevator. They'd find someone willing to donate enough money to pay for his services, *if* they wanted him badly enough. Or they'd cut costs elsewhere. It didn't matter, as long as he received his fees and a good support in proper equipment and personnel. Good people cost money, whether they were doctors, plumbers, space scientists, or lawyers. He remembered getting into his car—a sleek new model, with special modifications, real leather upholstery and four hundred horses under the hood.

He didn't remember much of the drive out of town—only the rain-slick street . . . the sudden corner . . . the explosive sound of the blown tire . . . the tree . . . the rending shriek of metal . . . and blackness.

He'd been lucky, they said, lucky to live. Only minor bruises and unimportant cuts—except for the hands. His hands had been badly smashed. It took thousands upon thousands of his dollars to bring in the best surgeons to repair the bones; cosmetic surgeons to repair the skin; therapists to aid him in regaining his skill.

Then there had been the visit to Dr. Noto, the eminent orthopedic surgeon. The plump, bald-headed man had studied the X rays in silence, which only irritated Strange. He knew the doctor had spent a long time on the X rays already and this was just window dressing.

"I don't know how to tell you this . . ." Dr. Noto began.

"Speak up, man!" Strange snapped. "I can take it. What do the X rays show?"

The orthopedic surgeon spoke slowly, reluctantly. "Stephen, you've had a very bad accident. Although your hands *seem* to be all right, the nerves have been severely damaged."

Strange stared at his hands. Nerve tissue did not repair itself very well; once severed, nerves did little to rebuild their electrical connections. Only very minor repairs were ever done and there were no sufficiently good surgical techniques developed to assist in the healing.

"You . . . you mean . . . ?" Stephen Strange's carefully controlled exterior was marred by an expression of stunned amazement and

horrified realization. He *had* been having a little trouble, but he accounted for that by assuming he was not yet fully healed.

"Yes," Dr. Noto said. "You'll never be able to perform an operation again." They both knew the tremendous skill required to be a surgeon, and to be a *great* surgeon required even more. Men who considered themselves skilled with their hands—carpenters, pilots, dentists—were clumsy compared to the subtle and almost microscopic motions of a skilled surgeon.

Stephen Strange refused to believe. "No!" he said. He backed away. *"No!* I don't *believe* you! You're lying! You *must* be lying!" He held out his hands. "They're well, I tell you." But Noto had just shaken his head sadly.

Others tried to help him, but he was still too arrogant, too vain, and too bitter to take help of any kind. His self-pity threatened to swallow him whole.

"Even though you can't operate, you can work as my consultant," Dr. Ziegler had said. "As my assistant."

"Stephen Strange assists nobody!" he had replied in a nasty voice.

He went into seclusion, spending days brooding, letting bitterness fill his soul. He had no friends, no lovers, no family, none who really cared for him—only those who depended upon him. He continued his physical therapy with an obsession that took all his time.

"I must be the best . . . the *greatest!* Or else—*nothing!"* He ground his teeth in anger and frustration. "I'll never consent to work for anyone else!"

He lost track of time. He listlessly stopped doing his physical therapy. His money ran out. He moved from his palatial home to an apartment, then to a single room. He neglected his appearance, grew unshaven and shaggy. He stared for hours at his hands, refought battles in his mind, relived triumphs, and felt very sorry for himself.

He became little more than a human derelict, wandering the city aimlessly. He felt contemptuous for those around him, just as he always had, only now those around him were bums. These vagrants were, in his mind, stupid and witless. He and he alone had suffered the unendurable tragedy. It had been Fate herself who had singled him out. The others had just been stupid and careless and deserved their miserable condition.

One day, slouched against a scabby brick wall near the docks, drifting into a favorite dream—miraculous recovery, instant recognition, fame, fortune, the tribute of lesser beings—words penetrated his fogged brain.

"Yeah, hey, I heard of the Ancient One, also. They say he can cure

anything, by some magic power, I heard."

Strange looked up. A couple of seamen were walking along the street. The one with the heavy seabag over his shoulder said, "If you ask me, he's just a legend." The argument began, fading off as they walked on toward the seedy delights of the waterfront bars.

But the words clicked something in Stephen Strange's mind. *The Ancient One.* Many times in the past he had heard that name mentioned, mostly in low whispers; too many times for there not to be *some* sort of truth to it all. *Was* there truth to this . . . this modern legend? History tells us there *have* been men with certain unusual powers, he thought. What if this Ancient One is such a man?

It took the last of his money and he spent weeks traveling to the Orient on the cheapest transportation. In India, with his money gone, he had hitchhiked the last kilometers, then walked up the mountain, staggering into the quiet of the templelike building. It reeked of time and incense. His months of searching were over. He knew it. Something told him.

Within the domed temple there was a thronelike chair with an Oriental sitting cross-legged upon it, wearing a purple robe and a strange golden headdress.

"You! Old man!" Strange's voice cut through the silence of the temple like a dropped pan. "Are *you* the one I seek? Are you called 'the Ancient One'?"

The head rose and the calm eyes looked at him. The man was old, very, very old. "I am the Ancient One," he said.

Strange staggered closer. He was close to collapse, headachy from hunger, dry from thirst, and desperate from longing. "Then *you're* the one with the magic healing power!" He held out his hands and stumbled closer, unshaven, smelly, and shabby. "I need you! You *have* to help me!"

"Be patient, man of the Western world."

Strange made a sound and came toward the old man. "I heal none save those who deserve it," the old man said, his voice creaky and weak. "The power of my magic must never be wasted on the undeserving! First you must prove you are *worthy!"*

Anger suffused Stange's mind. He had come so far. It was the end of the trail for him. His string was played out. It was all or nothing. "You can't refuse me!" he said, starting toward the old Oriental with his hands spread into claws. "I won't *let* you! I've traveled too far . . . waited too long!"

"Stop!" the Ancient One said, gesturing with his long-nailed hand. For a microsecond, it seemed as if his hand glowed with light. Stephen

Strange gasped in surprise.

"Wha—!" He was raised off the ground. His worn boots were two feet from the smooth stones of the temple floor. He gaped down in complete surprise.

"I will permit no act of violence here!" the old man said with authority. "None may lift a hand against the Ancient One!"

Strange's desperate writhing to get free of the invisible hand that grasped him was futile. *He's holding me motionless above the ground,* he thought with wonder. *With just a gesture! It's uncanny!*

"And now," the Oriental sage said, "I shall peer into your brain . . . into your memory . . . and learn the truth about you!"

Like papers fluttering past in a strong wind, Stephen Strange saw his entire life. Earliest memory. Childhood. School. Early hurts, early triumphs. The growing desire to become a doctor. The feeling of superiority, the growing sureness that he had been selected for a very special fate. Early manhood. Medical school. The first time he had put scalpel to living flesh. The antiseptic atmosphere of the hundred operating rooms in which he had created his legend. The arrogance, the haughty egotism. The accident. His hands. The plunge into despair and self-pity. The trip. Now.

"You sought me for my healing power," the old man said, making a gesture that lowered Strange to the floor. "But I cannot help you, for your motives are still selfish!"

The anger began to grow again within Strange, but before he spoke, the Ancient One continued. "And yet . . . and yet, I seem to see a spark within you . . . a spark of decency . . . of goodness . . . which I might be able to fan into a flame."

Strange gritted his teeth. He was not interested in decency or goodness, only in recovering the skill and power of his hands, for without their undeniable ability he was nothing—less than nothing. A godling fallen from Olympus.

"If you will stay here . . . study with me," the old man said in his reedy voice, "perhaps you will find within yourself the cure you seek."

Disgust rose in Stephen Strange. "I should have known." he sneered. "It was all a waste of time! You're nothing but an old fraud!" He turned away, determined to leave. "Your little parlor tricks don't impress *me!* I'm leaving." He stopped as he caught a glimpse out the window.

The landscape was covered with snow as far as he could see. There had been no snow at all when he had staggered into the mountainside temple. Cold, yes. but hardly snowdrifts. "Where did that snow come from?" he exclaimed. "It wasn't there before!" He pressed close to the

cold window, looking down the mountain. “I could never make it down through the pass now!”

“No,” the Ancient One said softly. “You will have to remain until it thaws.”

Strange turned suspiciously from the window. “That snow isn’t *your* doing, is it?” The moment he said it, he felt foolish. “Aw, what am I saying? Pretty soon, I’ll convince myself you *do* have magic powers!”

The old man permitted himself a faint smile. “Naturally, man of the Western world, you must not allow yourself to believe in magic! It would be unseemly.”

Strange made a face and looked again out of the window. The drifts were even higher. These Himalayas must be pretty weird, he thought. You could get killed out there. Good thing he had gotten to the temple —or whatever it was—before the storm hit.

He heard a sound and turned to see a husky man about his own age or slightly older come into the room. He was thickset, with a mane of black hair, but going bald above the temples. He wore an Oriental-style thin mustache and goatee, and a plain, dark-green Chinese robe. His dark eyes, under thick brows, glared with unconcealed hostility at the unshaven and unsavory-looking stranger.

“And now,” the Ancient One said, “inasmuch as you must remain here until the snow thaws, my pupil, Mordo, will show you to your chamber.”

Stephen Strange gave an involuntary shiver. *Mordo!* The very name was frightening, almost theatrically so. But he smiled inwardly, for his own name had caused his schoolmates and fellow medical students a lot of not-so-innocent fun. Yet this Mordo *was* a creepy-looking character.

Strange was assigned a room—bare but for a cot and a stool—as tidy and as pleasing as a monk’s cell. He wandered the temple at will, ate sparse meals of rice and soup, and was totally and completely bored. The days became weeks. He explored the place out of boredom. There were many rooms filled with ancient thick books, fragile scrolls, pots and jars—all sealed—and hundreds of talismans, amulets, chains, and symbols carved in stone and cast in metal.

Every day Strange saw Mordo studying, sitting in the Oriental lotus position—one Strange found foreign to his Western ways—but he paid little or no attention to Strange. The servants were wraiths that came and went and spoke no English. There was no one to talk to and nothing to read. The Ancient One spent days sitting motionless, eyes closed, taking no nourishment. *He could die and no one would know until he started to smell,* Strange thought.

He saw Mordo with a huge scroll unrolled before him. It was

covered with marks meaningless to Stephen Strange. *Looks like a typical doctor's prescription,* he thought with wry humor. *But all that Mordo does is study those meaningless scrolls and recite his empty dirges in that boring monotone of his. What a waste of time! I never should have come here in the first place!*

Strange wandered through the temple, hands deep in his pockets, glancing from time to time out the frosted windows, hoping for an early thaw. He turned a corner in the stone corridor and found he was approaching the room where the Ancient One sat on his thronelike chair.

I'll ask the old man if he knows how long it takes the snow to melt around here, he thought to himself. He turned into the archway to the Ancient One's room and stopped suddenly.

The Ancient One sat as before, unmoving, his head slightly bowed in meditation. Around him, in writhing tendrils of faint green, were transparent vapors. Even as Strange watched, the vapors thickened, almost obscuring the old man. Strange saw the old man's eyes pop open and heard his whispered words.

"The vapors of Valtorr! I am being attacked by an unseen enemy!"

Strange took a step into the room, but hesitated. What could he do? How can one combat tenuous vapors?

"The vapors were spawned by black magic!" the Ancient One said, even as the green vapors thickened to opaqueness, almost as if made of something solid. "And only by black magic can they be dispelled!"

The vapors almost obscured the old man now, hiding him beneath a writhing dome of green, closing in, constricting. "I summon the powers of the Vishanti!" the old Oriental cried. "By the spell of the dread Dormammu, in the name of the all-seeing Agamotto . . . all thy powers I summon . . . *Begone,* forces of darkness!"

There was a blinding flash of light which staggered Stephen Strange. The vapors had dissolved into nothingness by the time Strange's eyes had returned to normal.

The old man slumped forward, one hand holding his head, and Strange ran quickly to him. "If I hadn't seen it, I'd never have believed it," he said. "What was that? What did it mean? What force defeated it?" The questions boiled up in Stephen Strange's scientific mind.

"I cannot explain to a nonbeliever, but . . ." The old man's voice was weak and the odd encounter seemed to have drained him. "I must be always on my guard . . . The forces of evil are ever pitted against me!"

Strange brought the old man a glass of water and after a few sips he seemed recovered. "Look, I'm not a surgeon anymore, but I'm still a doctor. I can see that you're weak . . . ill . . . You need rest."

The Oriental waved a wrinkled hand. “Impossible! I must remain until I find a successor. The evil forces must not be allowed to run free on Earth.”

Strange tried more arguments, but nothing would nudge the old man, so he wandered away, thoughtful and apprehensive. As he stared out at the snowscape he spoke aloud. “If I stay here much longer. I’ll end up becoming a believer! I’ve got to get away before I become a part of all this madness!”

Already what he had seen was being rationalized away, discredited, and doubted. Nevertheless, he kept an eye on the old man, who at least did not seem to get any worse.

Several more weeks passed and one day Stephen Strange found the snows were at last melting. He went outside in his shabby leather jacket and looked it over. It would soon be time to leave. The knowledge both elated and depressed him. These were conflicting emotions, and he had not had much experience with emotions of any kind—except pride, envy, and greed.

He walked back in and immediately smelled something. Incense was nothing new, but this was an odor of a different sort. He followed the scent until he discovered Mordo standing over a small table. The student magician had his back to Strange and was talking in an intense voice.

“Dormammu, accept my incense offering! Let the force of your power descend upon my enemy! Let him feel your fatal touch! I beseech you, Dormammu!”

Stephen Strange could see, on the table, a ring of burning incense, which emitted an odd green smoke. The smoke parted as Mordo waved his hand and Strange saw a small effigy within the ring of smoke. It was of the Ancient One!

“Dormammu, do not fail me!” Mordo’s voice filled the chamber with an intensity that startled Strange.

“That replica, the spell . . .” muttered Strange. The one who had tried earlier to kill the Ancient One was his own student—Mordo!

Mordo turned suddenly, as if a signal had been given, and stared right at the half-hidden Strange. “Ah! The prying stranger has found me!” He gestured at the replica of the Ancient One and again the wind of his hand parted the smoke. “You wonder what it is I do . . .”

Mordo took a few steps toward Strange, a smile of evil pleasure upon his heavy face. “I’ll tell you, because you are too weak to stop me! I have learned more than the Ancient One suspects, and once he is slain, *I* shall be the only master of black magic!”

Strange was angered, and offended by Mordo’s arrogance. There

was only a flicker of recognition—so this was the way people felt around him, when *he* had been arrogant and proud!

"You won't get away with it!" he snapped, turning away toward the arch. "I'll tell him—he'll toss you out!"

"Fool!" roared Mordo. The furor in his voice caused Strange to glance back and that was his undoing. "You think I am *helpless?* You think *you* can defeat my plan?" Strange again started to turn, but Mordo's hypnotic eyes held him. *"Behold!"* the magician said.

Light seemed to flare from Mordo's eyes and Stephen Strange gaped in surprise. The light filled Strange's vision until there was nothing else, only the staring, bulging eyes and the brilliance.

"See how easily I can cast a spell upon you?" Mordo sneered. "A spell which will prevent you from ever giving away my secret!"

With a mighty effort of will, Strange wrenched himself from that terrible gaze, but escape was not that simple. Wisps of green vapor seemed to come out of nowhere, swirling about his head in tenuous arms. The wisps became bands and they orbited his head, whichever way he turned. With incredible swiftness they closed around him, thickening, darkening, becoming a heavy metal clamp around his mouth. Stephen Strange tried to cry out, but he could not. The best he could manage was an inarticulate rumbling deep in his throat.

Eyes wide with fear he staggered back, then glimpsed a mirror. But the reflection did not show the gray metal band that encased his head and locked his jaw firmly in place!

Then it isn't really there, he thought. *Yet I am unable to speak.* His mind was staggered by the reality that this thought revealed. So there *is* such a thing as a magic spell—and this is *proof* of it!

In the reflection. Strange could see Mordo's triumphant glare. Swiftly, Stephen Strange conceived a plan of action. Although he could not speak, he *could* move. He turned quickly and leaped for Mordo's throat.

But the green-clad magician was even swifter. With a gesture he caused flashes of light to leap from the four directions of the compass and bind Strange's wrists together in a steely grip.

"Halt!" Mordo exclaimed. "By the powers of darkness, I command you!"

Stephen Strange was helpless. He could feel the cold hard edges of the mask covering his face and the cold bright light that bound his hands.

"Weak, unknowing western dog!" Mordo sneered. "How helpless you are before the magic of the ancients!" He gave Strange a contemptuous look. "And now I shall finish with you!"

He gestured and Strange gasped. Both steel mask and binding beams of light flickered and disappeared. “There!” Mordo said. “None can see your iron clamp, or the force that surrounds your wrists . . . but *you! You* know that they are there!” Mordo laughed roughly and walked away, leaving Strange confused and angry.

Strange felt his face. He could feel nothing, yet he could not free his jaw. His hands were free to move, however, and his legs. Strange tried to rationalize it.

It’s probably nothing more than simple hypnotism, he thought. *I won’t let that stop me!*

He started off through the cold stone corridors toward the Ancient One’s favorite room. *I’ll go to the Ancient One,* he thought, *and—*

He let out a cry of sheer agony. Bolts of light flashed out from the compass points, binding his legs. The moment he stopped moving, the light beams flickered and disappeared.

It was no bluff! Mordo does possess the power of black magic, he thought. *But what can I do? I’ve got to warn the old man, got to save him —but how?*

Strange found he could walk again, but the moment he thought of warning the Ancient One the beams of light flashed, binding his ankles in searing pain until he stopped trying to move.

Thinking quickly, Strange put his thoughts to other things—multiplication tables. Just how high *was* the Empire State Building? The compression of a deuterium pellet by laser light was 0.000,000,001 seconds. Was it Puccini or Verdi who wrote *La Boheme?* Ah, yes, Puccini. Cerebrovascular disease is the third biggest killer in the United States.

He was almost to the arch looking into the Ancient One’s chamber. He could hear Mordo talking to the old man. *He doesn’t suspect a thing!* Strange thought. Fiji, Barbados, and Iceland are the nations with the smallest number of people in their armed forces: none. Fourteen stone is 196 pounds, in the British measure. “Wherever the art of medicine is loved, there also is the love of humanity.” Hippocrates, about 400 B.C. Attila the Him, Félix Faure—president of France—and Pope Leo VIII all died having sex. The pyramid of Cheops was 146.6 meters high.

“You have shown much progress in your studies, my pupil,” the old man said as Strange shuffled into view. Mordo stood with his back to Strange. “You have mastered many of the mystic arts,” the old man added.

“That is good!” Mordo said, and Strange heard the contempt in his voice. “For I am eager to follow in your honored footsteps.”

I bet you are, Strange thought and opened his mouth. "Listen, I—" He gasped with pain as the steel clamp seized his jaws and the beams of light struck out at his wrists and ankles. He was once again helpless. This time the restriction did not go away when he stopped moving.

"Who dares intrude?" the old man asked in a quavering voice.

Mordo turned with calm confidence. "It is you," he said, "the witless blunderer from the far Western continent." His eyes hardened. "Well, if you have words to utter, *speak!"*

Strange blinked his eyes, the pain at wrists and ankles extreme. He knew the steel and the light beams were invisible, but he felt their painful reality. He saw the sneer on Mordo's lips and his frustration increased.

The green-clad magician turned away contemptuously. "Send him back to the New World, Ancient One! There is no place for him here!"

Strange tried to catch the old man's attention, but the hooded eyes seemed sightless. Strange managed a glare at Mordo. *How smug he is,* he thought angrily. *He knows I cannot expose him. Never have I hated anyone so much!*

There was another momentary flash across Stephen Strange's mind. He had never loved anyone either. He had never cared for anyone enough to either love *or* hate them. It was sad that hatred was his first really deep emotional experience.

"Begone," the old man said and Strange found he could walk . . . but only away.

Alone and helpless, Strange brooded, his consciousness tinged with the smoky feelings of anger. *Now, at last,* he thought, *I see the power of sorcery! But I cannot give up! Mordo must never be allowed to defeat the Ancient One. For if he should, what would happen to the world as we know it?*

Strange acknowledged the depths of his sudden conversion . . . or revelation . . . or realization. He was still confused, uncertain, and afraid, but he *was* determined.

A servant passed by and Strange asked for a glass of water, and then realized he could speak. *I am only subject to Mordo's spell if I try to warn the Ancient One,* he thought. *Yet, I am able to speak of other matters! So there is still one hope.*

Stephen Strange conceived a plan. *If I, too, can learn the secrets of this black magic, then I can perhaps battle Mordo with his own weapons.*

He found he could walk and did so, straight to the chamber of the old Oriental, whom he found alone. The old man's head came up slowly and he acknowledged Stephen Strange's existence.

"Ancient One, I crave a boon. I wish to accept the terms you offered me some days ago." He swallowed nervously before continuing. "I wish to study at your feet, to be taught your knowledge . . . to . . . prove myself worthy of the mystic arts."

The faintest of smiles touched the withered cheeks. "Ah, at last I have reached the *real* Doctor Strange!" His voice dropped to a whisper. "I knew that there was good within you . . . if I could but bring it to the surface. I accept you, my son. You shall be my disciple!"

Stephen Strange swallowed, astonished at the feeling of raw emotion all this brought to him. But the old Oriental was not yet finished astonishing him. The tiny wrinkled figure made a pass with his hands through the air.

"First, I release you from Mordo's spell . . . *so!"* There was a flash of light from the old man's head, enveloping Strange for a brief moment. "Now you are free to speak, to act, even as before."

"You . . . you *knew* of Mordo's spell?"

"Of course," the ancient Oriental mystic said. "The pupil can have no secrets from his master." The elderly wise man raised a long-nailed finger. "But, although he is evil, I prefer to keep Mordo *here,* where I can control him, rather than banish him.

"One day, my son, when I am gone, it will be *your* task to battle Mordo . . . to the finish!" Strange gulped audibly, remembering Mordo's casual enslavement of him. "You have been tested, and you have passed your baptism of fire!" Strange felt an elation, yet a weight of responsibility settled upon him.

"But the path ahead of you will be difficult, and fraught with danger." The ancient mystic peered through the floating wisps of incense at the newest of his disciples. "Do you wish to continue?"

Stephen Strange took a deep breath and made a commitment. "I do, Ancient One!"

It began at once. The days turned to weeks, the weeks to months, then to years. He never noticed when Mordo was no longer seen around the mountainside castle, for he studied the mystic arts with a fervor that surprised him. Not even during examinations at the medical school had he worked so hard and for so long. Time meant nothing; he was often surprised to look out a window and find it day when he had thought it night, or spring when he had thought it still winter.

Slowly he changed, though he was not even aware of the changes. The unshaven, desperate and nearly broken husk that had been the hopeless Stephen Strange became the confident Doctor Strange. He was no longer arrogant—the rigid discipline of the Ancient One had

seen to that—and his life took on a deeper meaning, one that went far deeper than a mere desire to revenge himself on Mordo, or to protect the old teacher.

Slowly he prepared himself for the battles ahead, and he had a feeling they would be epic battles—battles which could only be won by magic . . . and *had* to be won by Stephen Strange. His world became a world of candle flame illuminating ancient parchment, a world of canticles and spells, of learning what *not* to do as well as what to do—and when to do it. He found the insights into his own life, into his very existence, to be shocking and then strengthening. His contacts with beings and powers in other dimensions were frightening, but always he was guided and protected by the Ancient One. Then, on one of these forays into the unknown, he turned to the fragile wraith that was the Ancient One's astral projection, and found he was not there.

He almost panicked. Alone in formless blackness, which was pierced by the shimmering forms of a horde of creatures of light, he thought he had been abandoned.

Then came the voice in his mind, the calm, reassuring voice of his master. "You have the strength. You have the power. Use it."

Strange turned, his hands striking out, fingers spread, stiff, and flickering with forks of light. "By the flames of the Faltine! Begone!"

Crimson fire leaped from his fingertips, searing the very fabric of ebony space, curling it up, ripping through it to engulf the approaching darts of light, to turn them away, to banish them forever. The blackness faded to purple, to blue, to a lighter blue hung with the thick white clouds of the Himalayas. He was back, and safe.

The Ancient One sat on a nearby rock. It was a thousand-foot drop to ice and snow. The winds howled in the white canyons, yet here, on the ledge, it was calm and sunny. Doctor Strange looked at his mentor. "I . . . I . . ."

"You survived," the Ancient One said. "You should go forth into the world."

Strange stared at him. "No, I can't . . . I have so much to learn *here* . . ."

The wrinkled hand gestured at the outer world beyond the snow-laden mountains. "There are things to learn out there. There are tests to meet. Adversaries to temper the steel within you. You should go."

They looked at each other, student and master. Then Strange had turned and walked down the ledge and into the stone temple. He left the mountainside retreat a short time later. Eventually he did meet Baron Mordo. They battled and Strange defeated him. But the insidious Mordo returned again and again.

Stephen Strange shook his head to clear it and glanced at his beloved Clea. “I was thinking of . . .”

“The Ancient One?”

Strange nodded. Abruptly, he rose from his chair and strode to the window. “It is not Mordo . . . but . . . I do not know what it is. I sense only the faintest of . . . disturbances.”

Clea nodded. It was often difficult to put such things into words. Words were confining things, static, meaning only one or two things at once. The disturbances in the very air that had somehow alerted Doctor Strange were not things to which words would stick. It was enough to know that Stephen Strange was alerted.

Six

Both Clea and Strange turned as they heard the chimes. Someone was at the front door. They saw Wong cross the parquet, then reappear in the doorway. “Master, there is a woman here, the wife of a minister of God.”

“Give her something for whatever charity she represents,” Clea said, but a motion from Strange stopped her.

“No, Wong, send her in.” He seemed oddly alert, almost like a dog ready to pounce.

In a few moments a pleasant-looking woman came into Strange’s study. She looked at the two across the room, at their odd clothing, then around the room itself. Strange smiled faintly. To the uninitiated it was a . . . *strange* . . . room. There were bookcases, but instead of containing the latest bestsellers or coffee-table-type volumes on chic subjects, there were thick books bound with heavy board covers sheathed in carved leather. There were scrolls that looked as if they would crack if you touched them, and crumble to dust if you opened them for the first time in hundreds of years.

Instead of bric-a-brac there were skulls bound in golden bands, their tops gone, and filled with . . . odd things. There were a few stoppered jars, a bust carved in marble, another cast in burnished silver and embossed with golden medallions about the base. Instead of family photos, there were framed portraits of holy men, and one, prominently displayed, of a very old Oriental. On a pedestal that looked as if it were carved by a madman, depicting curling dragons and reptilian forms, was a smoky sphere.

The woman looked again at the two waiting people. Clea was beautiful, although much too provocative to suit her tastes, with stark white hair arranged in hornlike shapes on each side of her brows. A medallion hung between her breasts and there were ornate rings on her fingers. But it was the man who commanded her attention.

"Doctor Strange?"

"Yes, Madam?"

"Doctor Stephen Strange?"

He smiled and inclined his head. He was not young, though far from old, she decided. Handsome, but stern, wearing a mustache, and his temples were white—but his clothes were indeed startling and discomforting to the middle-aged woman. He wore a bright blue tunic over blue tights, and a red cape with a cowl that flared up with what she thought was unnecessary drama. The cape was edged in golden embroidery and held together at the throat by an odd large medallion.

"Come in, sit down," he said. "You are—?"

"I'm . . . Mrs. Billie Joe Jacks."

"Ah," Strange said.

"You . . . you don't know who he is, do you?"

Strange smiled. "A minister of God."

"Yes. He . . . uh . . . we are on television mostly. From our . . . our Temple of Light, you know."

"Go on." His eyes seemed to envelop her. She felt her nervousness disappear.

"You don't remember me, do you, Doctor? I mean, you look so different, I wasn't certain, and I know it's been years and the good Lord knows I don't look the same, but—"

"Alicia Lubbock," he said, remembering.

"You remembered!" She beamed at him.

"You were my patient years ago. You had a most difficult time."

"You gave me a new heart. Doctor Barnard was just beginning to do the transplants then, and you saved me . . . for the Lord's work."

"It was not so happy an occasion for the young accident victim whose heart we utilized," Strange said. "But that is not the reason you came here." Strange was sometimes made uncomfortable when reminded of those years spent as a highly paid and arrogant surgeon.

"It's my husband. You know, Billie Joe?" Strange gestured for her to go on. "He . . . he's been acting very, excuse me, but acting *strangely."*

"In what way?" Strange asked softly.

"He . . . he has these dreams—nightmares, really. He . . . says things. I can't *quite* get it, but it . . . it doesn't sound good to me. Oh,

he's had dreams before, you know, everyone does from time to time." She looked around apprehensively. "But these are different, you know. And he's been acting differently."

"In what way?" Clea asked.

"Well, after one of these, well, nightmares I guess you'd call them, after one of those he's . . . just different. Even his sermons are different. He used to, you know, preach the Good Book pretty straight. Not Fundamentalist, you understand, but a good solid Christian doctrine. We have quite an audience, all over the world."

"You assist him?" Strange asked.

She nodded. "Offstage and on, if you follow me. I used to help prepare his sermons . . . You know, do research, look up the quotations to help make a point, that sort of thing? And I lead the Celestial Chorus . . . That's our choir. But lately . . . well, lately Billie Joe's been doing his sermons all himself, every word. He used to read them to me first, you know? Sort of test 'em out? But not anymore."

"What is it you want us to do?" Strange asked.

Mrs. Jacks looked uncomfortable. "Well, what I'd *really* like is for Billie Joe to go to one of them head-shrinkers, you know? Psychiatrists? But he'd never do that. He said a man ought to have his head examined going to one of them fellas." She smiled briefly. "But I remembered you, Doctor, and it isn't all old memories, either. I've . . . heard things about you. I think you might be the one to help my Billie Joe."

"I'll do what I can, Alicia." Strange smiled warmly and took her hand. "Can he come here? Soon?"

"Well, we're in town for a meeting." She flashed another brief smile. "A kind of religious summit, you might say. Billie, he says we oughta meet on Zion, over there in the Holy Land, but that might give us all snooty ideas." She flashed another nervous smile. "Doctor Strange, I . . ."

"Go on, Alicia." His eyes bored into hers.

"You'll see him then?" Strange nodded.

"As soon as you can get him here."

"I'll have him here in an hour."

"Not in this traffic you won't," Clea said.

"An hour and a half then," Alicia said stubbornly. "He'll come or I'll . . . I'll . . . *do* something!"

Strange smiled and took her elbow. "As soon as you can, then. We'll be waiting."

The moment Alicia Jacks had gone, Clea turned to Strange. "Stephen, what was that? The next thing you know you'll be taking

house calls."

"If I must," he muttered as he went back into his study. He sank into his big chair with such an expression of intense concentration that Clea knew better than to discuss it further.

Seven

"By the rocks of Arrak, Alicia, I certainly do not need any mumbo-jumbo charlatan in my life!"

"Now, Billie Joe, you just get right in there. Doctor's been waiting on you."

They came through the door into the study, ushered by the silent Wong, and Billy Joe Jacks took in the arcane furnishings with a frown. "Where's your bell, book, and candle, Strange? Where's your feather mask and your rattle, eh?" He flicked his fingers at the thick, heavy cover of a fat old volume atop a pile on Strange's desk. "What's this, eh? Some sort of *law* book about deals with the Devil, huh?"

Strange said nothing, but his study of the evangelist was very complete. Doctors can learn a great deal more just by looking at a patient and feeling his skin than the layman thinks. Strange crossed the room and courteously extended his hand. "I'm Stephen Strange," he said. "This is Clea, my assistant."

"How do you do," Billie Joe Jacks said listlessly. He accepted Strange's offer of a chair and sat down, followed by Alicia, then Clea, nearby. Strange stood, studying Jacks. He appeared exhausted, irritated, and nervous, the latter manifestations caused perhaps by the first.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions," Strange said.

"Go on, get it over with; then I can go home. Well, back to the hotel, anyway. Sometimes it seems as if I *live* in hotels!"

"How do you feel, generally?"

"I feel fine. A little tired, maybe, but I'll be up for the meeting. Jet lag probably. The work of the Lord is not always easy, you know." He glared at Strange, who thought his eyes red. "But just get me out there in front of those cameras and the will of the Lord comes into me, guides me, makes me his *tool!"*

"Billie Joe's extraordinarily good, you know. Not everyone can use a camera like he can," Mrs. Jacks said softly.

"Not sleeping much then?" Strange asked casually.

"No, but there are a lot of things brewing. We just might get a consolidation with the Brotherhood of American Protestants; will that be a thorn in the side of Satan! Then there're the overtures from Pope John Paul—the *Pope,* no less! He's had the Archbishop of Canterbury over. He's talking with others, so why not Billie Joe Jacks, eh? Big things afoot, you see? We're going into Brazil with our syndicated programs, both radio and television. *Brazil,* mind you! Lots afoot, lots cooking, as they say. Working for the Lord. Putting it all together. Making it work, eh? Isn't that the American way, eh? Getting folks to work together? Doing the work of the *Lord!"*

Jacks's voice had risen and grown stronger during his monologue, to the point where Stephen Strange saw the power this man had. It was the power of a magnetic personality with a belief. It was a strong power, belief, even if what he believed was not what Strange believed and knew to be true. But it was definitely a power to persuade. Strange leaned forward, his fingers toying with the great medallion around his neck.

The medallion was the Eye of Agamotto, the most powerful physical legacy that the Ancient One had given Stephen Strange.

The evangelist talked on . . . Conversions . . . miracles of faith . . . numbers . . . believers . . . testaments . . . gigantic encampments . . . revivals of the spirit of God . . . movements sweeping the nation with Billie Joe Jacks leading them, focusing their energy . . .

His voice slowed. Alicia's eyes drooped and suddenly she was asleep. But Billie Joe continued. "This summit meeting, this locus of temporal power, this . . . will . . . bring together . . . the most powerful of . . . of all the . . . the factions . . . heal our divisions . . . with the . . . the blessings of . . . of the . . ."

Abruptly his head dropped. He was asleep. Gently, Strange moved his head back to a more comfortable position. The Eye had done its work. They would be asleep as long as needed for his explorations.

Stephen Strange sat back in his chair and gave Clea a quick smile. He knew what he was about to do made her very nervous. When Stephen Strange projected his astral form out of his physical body, that body was helpless, totally vulnerable. If someone were to kill the

physical body of Stephen Strange, his astral self would be lost forever; forever doomed to roam in strange dimensions. Here, in his Greenwich Village home, the place he called his sanctum sanctorum, he was relatively safe. But it still made Clea nervous and he smiled inwardly to see her setting herself to be the guardian of his lifeless husk. Clea had powers too, and, although not nearly as powerful as Stephen Strange, she was not to be discounted, either, as many had discovered.

He closed his eyes and relaxed his body. The trance took only seconds. He rose up almost at once, glancing down to see his mortal flesh slump slightly. Invisible to all, including Clea, he curved through the air, near the carved, wooden ceiling beams, and dove into Billie Joe Jacks's dream.

Eight

. . . Disorientation . . .

. . . the private world of private symbols . . .

. . . intensely personal shorthand, to be learned, quickly before the dream destroyed him . . .

Strange coped. His mind, quick and analytical, sorted out the swirl of colors and shapes. The dream took shape, like a lens twisting into focus.

Clouds . . . sky . . . cool dry air . . . the hint of green earth far below . . . speed . . . Moving through the thunderheads, past the mountainous gray-white masses, between tenuous walls, through dark passes, over sunlit plains, to—

—to?

. . . to?

The goal seemed vague, unfocused . . . No, hidden, uncertain, distant . . .

The wind stirred the thickening clouds, moving the wet masses up and around, sculpting them, and still Strange flew through the mind dream toward—

—toward?

. . . toward?

The wind drew a curtain of gray mist across the path he was taking and Strange arrowed on, his astral body rocketing through the cooling atmosphere. The gray wall of cloud loomed over him, a mile high, miles wide, light enough to float, strong enough to carry uncounted tons of water high into the air.

Strange entered the cloud confidently. He expected the sunlight to

appear almost at once. He had skimmed through earlier veils of mist and emerged into the bright clear light, but this cloud seemed endless. He had misjudged the thickness. He willed his astral body up. He would rise above it, still aiming toward that distant, unseen goal, only . . .

. . . only . . .

. . . only there was no end, no bursting into light, merely a thickening, a darkening.

It grew cold. There was no up, no down, no gravity—no . . . anything. Suddenly, Stephen Strange realized he was not *feeling.* He was in his astral body, yet that body had the capability of feeling its environment, and he felt *nothing.*

"By the omnipotent Oshtur!" He willed himself to stop and felt that he did—but he was not certain. He willed his body to rise, fleeing upward toward the light.

Only there was no light, and it was colder, darker, and the very air seemed thicker. If fact, he realized, the gray mist in which he flew actually was thickening. His passage seemed to be slower, but his physical feelings even less noticable. The focus of his mind and eyes seemed to fixate. He seemed to be soaring through a gray tunnel with more gray at the end.

"By the eternal Vishanti!" he roared—and realized he had not heard his voice, only thought he had because he had spoken. "May the Shields of the Seraphim protect me!" he exclaimed, making the gestures of ritual precision. Glowing dots formed in the air around him, haloed by the mist, and the dots grew into glowing discs. The shimmering discs floated above and below and to every side, seven shining protectors.

But nothing launched itself out of the mist at him. The cold increased—he sensed this rather than felt it—and the light was leeched away bit by bit. *Billie Joe Jacks's dream was a trap!*

"Back!"

Dr, Strange twisted in the air, making the glowing shields vanish with a gesture, and he shot back through the mist toward the point where he had entered Jacks's dreamland.

Only he was wrong.

He traveled the distance through grayness as thick as mush and did not find the exit—*could not* find the exit.

"This dreamland is without a compass," he grumbled. He found it harder to breathe and that momentarily confused him. In his astral body he could sail through the vastness of the void, through minds and unknown dimensions, through the very rock of the planet itself—

there was no need to breathe. But he was feeling a shortness of breath. It was, in fact, almost the only thing he felt.

"By the vapors of Valtorr!" he exploded. His hand traced a line of cold fire in the sky, slicing through the mist like a giant's sword. He carved himself a passage toward the light. But the mist closed in around him, blinding him, filling in the wound as water does after the blade of the paddle.

He stopped and thrust out his arms to the side, pressing out a mighty psychic weight. "Circle of Shangtor, I command you! *Appear!"*

A radiance grew from his forehead, spreading into a sphere and pressed out to his fingertips. Within it, Stephen Strange was bathed in light. He could see and breathe and feel.

It was then the demons struck.

Lightning splashed off his shimmering sphere of golden light. A sharp-winged bat shape slanted by, screaming hoarsely. Another followed, screeching wildly, and a second jagged bolt of electricity caromed off his protective shield. A third shape zoomed by, sprinkling droplets of liquid fire. They struck his sphere of light like coals and ran down the sides to drip into the mist and be lost.

A shadow loomed up in the gray mists, a black shadow, its origin unseen, but monstrous and hulking. A long-fingered hand rose and lightning cracked, making sharp shadows on the clouds. The electricity struck and Strange's golden sphere rippled with scarlet, then purple, then ragged black streaks. The golden sphere of light vanished.

"By the hoary hosts of Hoggoth!" Strange exclaimed in surprise. His golden sphere was a new protective spell, tested and defeated on its first serious conflict.

Against the mountain of mist, Strange saw the shadowy figure raise its long arm again. He wasted no time. His own hand flew up, fingers spread.

"Cassorak! Spin your web of silver steel!"

A cold blue flame exploded from his palms, spreading out through the grayness, joining and rejoining in a melded web of gleaming silver bands. Around the edges of the web it crossed and recrossed itself, weaving a still larger network.

The figure in the clouds launched still another blast of sheer energy against Strange. The flashing strokes of power met and exploded among the silver bands. Sparks flew, the light was blinding, the colors running through the spectrum from intense yellow to fiery red to quivering purple, then back again.

Strange's bands of silver steel were twisted and black, bent and

tarnished beyond saving. He swept them aside with a word and raised both hands.

"Reveal yourself, you who would strike from ambush!"

Only the wind answered his cry.

The gray clouds closed in again. Dr. Strange turned in the air. "May the dead Dormammu defend me! Begone, this stifling cloak of numbness!"

The length of his blue-clad body crackled with fiery sparks, running up and down his lean frame like ants on an overturned hill. Then with a rush, feeling returned to Strange's flesh. Once again he felt the cold air, the whip of wind twisting his crimson cloak, smelled the dry ozone of the aerial heights, and he sucked in the chill air with gratitude.

But the Sorcerer Supreme had no time to digest the confusion of the dreamland in which he hovered. A lightning bolt, shimmeringly golden, struck at him. The canyons of drifting grayness were illuminated as if a giant strobe had gone off, and Strange was hurtled into the grayness by the great pointed spear of energy.

Pain suffused his body, crackling off his fingertips as he tumbled without dignity through the cold wet clouds. Gasping with pain, he drew himself up. "By the hoary hosts of Hoggoth!" he exclaimed. "That was a mighty blow—one only a sorcerer of immense power could summon!"

Strange swam upward through the blinding clouds, aiming back toward the target zone, willing himself through space. His astral body had received a powerful blow, one that would have shattered mortal flesh into disparate atoms gleaming with psychic florescence in the void. In this dreamland of Billie Joe Jacks, Strange realized he could be hurt. And if his astral body were hurt—destroyed—there would be no Stephen Strange. His mortal flesh would go on for a time, waiting . . . Then it would swiftly decompose.

He could be killed here, in the mind of the evangelist, just as certainly as in the reality of Earth. Still, he bored through the clouds, his senses telling him there was something lurking beyond the mist.

He was ready when the second lightning bolt flashed. As swift as the great electrical charge was, Strange was faster. The Shields of the Seraphim winked into being and the bolt dispersed its massive energy off their protective ring.

"By the eternal Vishanti—show yourself!"

Blue sparks crackled from his fingertips and the clouds melted back before him. Standing ankle deep in foaming mist was a powerfully built black man, his expression scowling and angry. His fists were up,

cocked, ready to strike out. In place of the traditional padded gloves were gleaming metal coverings, studded with razor-sharp points that would tear flesh from bone. The fighter wore gray trunks with a black stripe and advanced toward Strange in the fast one-two step of the accomplished professional.

Strange frowned in puzzlement. A prizefighter had been perhaps the last person he expected to see beyond the clouds. Was this some manifestation of a mad mind?

Still some distance away, the fighter's left jabbed out and a blue flash coming from it momentarily blinded Strange. Then the right fist struck out and another great blinding bolt of electricity lanced forth. Strange was hurt; his flesh seemed afire as he plummeted down. But he caught himself and rose swiftly to the level of the attacking prizefighter.

"By the mighty Arambula, I command you to reveal your name!"

The fighter jabbed, but the blue flash was only light, not a powerful striking force. The black man seemed torn with hatred and the words came reluctantly. "Joe . . . Joe Peerson . . ."

The name triggered a memory within Strange. A fighter all right, a contender; someone known and becoming powerful—like Billie Joe Jacks.

"May the crimson bands of Cyttorak bind you now!" Red bands popped into existence, surrounding Peerson, sinking into the clouds below and extending upward into the swirling mist. They could be seen, faintly, faded into the grayness above and below. Peerson struck at them with his mailed fists, but the columns were like steel and he staggered back, holding his injured hands.

"May you stay imprisoned until the dream of Billie Joe Jacks ceases to exist!"

Peerson moaned and stepped forward, his pugilistic nature gone, replaced by a genuine fear. "No! Strange, this dream is not Jacks's but —" He looked around, fearfully. "This is *dreamland,* man, don't you understand that? Nobody's dream, but—*everyone's dream!"*

Strange frowned. "A dimension of dreams?"

"Yeah, yeah, you get it. Hey, look, man, if I'm imprisoned here till it stops, hey, I'm here *forever!"*

"Go, then, to the land of the undreaming!" He gestured and Joe Peerson disappeared. Then as the crimson columns faded, Strange was struck in the back by a blast of coruscating fire.

Strange cried out in pain, but the spells woven into the very molecules of his cloak saved him. Even in astral projection, these spells were valid. He whirled, his body once again flooded with almost

unbearable pain.

The wall of grayness extended upward as far as the eye could see, pocked with bits of darkness, marred with shadowed clefts, each of which could hold an enemy. “By the sculpting claws of Cappello! Let the clouds begone!”

The cliff wall of mist swirled and dissipated, moving off to join up with nearby mountains of clouds. What was left was a man, clad in black, holding a weapon of some sort. It was long and silvered, glittering in the shadowless light, the tip of it glowing with a cold fire. The man raised the weapon to his shoulder and aimed it.

“Eternal Ito! Protect me!” A shimmering veil of rainbow light swept across space between Strange and the marksman just as the glittering weapon fired. A ball of searing flame arced across from the weapon to Strange’s protective veil. The flame rainbowed off the veil, and before it dissipated, the marksman fired again.

“Rings of Raggador!” Strange cried out. The veil of rainbow light curved out at the edges, surrounding the marksman, encasing him in a fiery ring of light. The light shrank to a dot and winked out of existence. The marksman was gone.

Nine

Steven Strange felt weak. The assaults on his astral body had required massive energy for him to defend himself. He felt drained and hazy. It was time to go back to the realm of the undreaming, he thought. He turned, spreading his cape, preparing to go back through the planes of unreality to the dreaming mind of Billie Joe Jacks.

"Winds of Watoomb! Take me to the portals of reality!" But before Strange could make the confirming gesture of execution, his world exploded.

White-hot heat struck him, followed by searing, numbing cold. Winds whipped the clouds around him, tumbling him, sweeping him along. He fell, pinwheeling through nothingness . . .

. . . blackness . . .

. . . sparks of fire exploded into quivering spheres of pale light.

. . . pain plucked at his senses . . .

. . . *flame* . . .

A spider as large as an elephant grabbed him in sticky, hairy claws, pulling him toward a beaked mouth dripping with saliva. The bulging beaded eyes glared, the ridged beak gaped—

"Mighty Tarag! Destroy this apparition of evil!" The fingers of his imprisoned arms flexed and the spider spasmed and dropped Strange. The hairy black body quivered, then split open in a bloody cleft. From the rupture slithered a luminous snake, its scales shining, its reptilian eyes hooded. The forked tongue slid out and back and the hiss drowned out all other sounds. The creature reared back its head, fangs glistening, and struck down at Strange, who was but a tenth its size.

Strange rolled aside. There was red rock under his body, hot red rock. The snake's head brushed Strange in its attack and the ivory fangs gouged twin grooves in the stone.

"Haggor!" Strange cried, stretching out his hand as the giant reptile pulled back for another strike. "Haggor, save thy servant!"

A hissing fog boiled, blindingly white, from Strange's fingers, and foamed over the snake. The serpent twisted and hissed as it disappeared in the roiling mist. For a second all was obscured—the ruptured carcass of the spider, the coiling snake, the flames beyond. Then the fog melted away and yet another savage creature stood poised to attack.

It was a man shape, covered in snakeskin, heavily muscled, eyes white, without pupils. He moved gracefully, almost sinuously, as he dodged an instinctively aimed bolt of light fired from Strange's outstretched arm.

"No good, Strange," the man shape said. There was a forked spear in his hand and he hurled it. The moment it left his hand another appeared. The first spear sank into the hot stone next to Stephen Strange as he scampered to his feet. The second and third spears were turned aside with a flick of Strange's fingers, as the sorcerer studied the creature before him.

In the long career of Dr. Strange, he had met numerous enemies in many guises. Some took the images of monsters, imposing humanoids, devils, and demons. Others sought to deceive him by assuming the persona of nonthreatening beings and creatures, to allay the fears of their enemies by misdirection. Yet all, in some manner, were projections of evil, of greed, envy, and lust for power. There was no doubt in Strange's mind that this snakeman was also the physical manifestation of some sort of evil.

The snake creature continued to hurtle spears and Strange continued to turn them aside. Then, with disconcerting suddenness, the snake thing smiled. Fangs showed, dripping with poison. The creature laughed—a hoarse, wheezing snort of triumph.

"By the—*ahh!"* Strange's fingers contracted in pain and he clutched his injured hand to himself. As he had been about to abolish the snake thing, pain had struck. He looked around in confusion. The spell he was about to evoke was one of the best, an invocation of the Vishanti, a protective incantation that would fire enemies into a nether world.

But it hadn't worked and as he looked he saw why. The forked spears he had so carelessly shunted aside had plunged into the hot rock in a carefully designed pentagram around his astral body. He was imprisoned and helpless. He heard a rumbling laugh and looked quickly at the snake man to see the beginnings of the metamorphosis.

The green-scaled skin became slack, sloughing off into long shreds of emerald, revealing beneath, a lean body of green flecked with black. The discarded strips of skin became an odd cloak, fastened at the wrists and streaming back to join a wider panel hanging down from a high dark collar.

White skin . . . gray, untidy hair . . . bulging, staring eyes . . .

"Nightmare!"

Insane eyes glittered as the smile of triumph spread across the dead-white face. "Strange," he said, his voice the howl of midnight wind through the canyons of the mind.

An ancient enemy. Strange's earlier premonitions had been correct. It had not been Mordo or Zota or any of the dark forces he had met early in his revitalized career.

Nightmare!

The lord of the dream dimension, the tyrant of the occult divisions that lurked beyond the walls of sleep. Time and again it had been Doctor Strange and *only* Strange who stopped the supernatural creature from invading and controlling the world of man by controlling his dreams.

Now the supernatural sorcerer had trapped Strange within the powerful pentagram, the basic symbol of all magic, black or white. Strange knew he could not pull the spears from the hot rock; that he would not be able to take the pain nor would he have the strength. He was trapped.

"What is it this time?" Strange said. "The same sad attempt at invasion?" He looked at the figure of Nightmare, his face in an expression of aloofness and disgust.

Nightmare laughed. His green cloak billowed in the hot winds. They were in a hellish landscape. Volcanoes spat fire and molten rock; hot puddles of lava bubbled nearby. Ebony smoke polluted the sky; flames sputtered up from a hundred cracks in the rusty soil. Distantly, there were screams and cries. It was not hell, but a localized imitation, and Strange knew it. It all existed in the mind, the dreamland of Billie Joe Jacks. Yet . . . that dream connected to the dream dimension, drew from it, was controlled and inspired by it.

"This time it is different, Strange," Nightmare sneered, his mad eyes staring lecherously.

"No," Strange countered. "You have been defeated before; you shall be defeated again."

"Not by you, Strange." He gestured and lava broke the surface nearby, burbling up through cracks, flowing down the rock toward Strange. It came on relentlessly, steaming, crusty on top where it was

relatively cooler—red-centered, burning, the molten heart of a planet bursting forth.

Stephen Strange did not hesitate. He pressed his long fingers to his temples. “In the name of Haggor, by the powers of the darkness beyond the darkness, protect thy servant!”

The lava seemed to naturally flow to one side or the other, steam rising, searing the rock beneath, flowing past the spears stuck in the rock, creating a little island in the stream of molten rock. Nightmare’s eyes blazed and with another gesture he caused a thunderclap over Strange’s head.

The roiling black smoke parted and down from it, screeching shrilly, came a thing right out of a madman’s nightmare. The flames lit its leathery wings with red as it plunged down, its outstretched claws like scimitars, its beak like the gouging mechanical maw of a dredging crane. Strange instinctively crouched, not from fear, but to draw the thing below the level of the topmost tips of the spears, into the magical dome of force that imprisoned him.

The screeching bird of prey was Strange’s way out—if he lived.

The swordlike claws raked at him, the great batlike wings beat the air above him, the shrill cries assaulted his ears. Strange ducked, avoiding the first and second strikes of the razor-sharp claws; then he leaped.

The winged creature was the size of a small airplane. When its extended claws brought the foot below the tips of the spears Stephen Strange leaped and grasped the scaly leg.

“Oshtur! Haggor! Part the way!”

The bat wings fluttered as the creature tried to stay airborne against the sudden weight. It rose above the pentagram of spears and the spell vanished. A spear was bent, another ripped from its rocky socket, as the mighty wings beat the smoky air. Strange pulled himself up against the furry underside of the monster, clinging to the leg, avoiding the vicious slash of the other foot.

Strange could not have escaped by himself from the imprisoning pentagram, but he who had created it—Nightmare—had sent in something that could lift him from the dome of force.

Dr. Strange drew back his hand, fingers together like a blade, and cried out, “By the dagger of Cim!” Then he plunged his hand into the breast of the creature above him. The screeching escalated into a deafening cry and then suddenly Strange was falling, for the bat-winged monster was gone, with the suddenness of a dream.

He fell to the red rock and saw Nightmare swinging his arm toward him. Green bands flew out, expanded, became an emerald net. Strange

gestured in return and the net dissolved at the joints, becoming motes of light which lost their pattern and drifted away to die.

Nightmare uttered a harsh cry of anger and the volcanoes beyond belched their fiery contents. Ash and lava rained down and Strange crossed his hands over each other, creating a dome of white light above himself.

“The twelve moons of Munnipor! The sixty aspects of Serenity! The hundred and forty-four seals of Agapotti!”

The volcanoes stopped and their cones melted into the red soil and the soil became flat and smooth. The bubbling lava ceased and spread itself thinly. The broken and bent spears wilted into the smoothing plain. The smoke drifted up and away.

The dreamworld was silver and flat, extending to the horizon and up into the purple night. Nightmare’s reflection on the shiny plain beneath his green-clad feet was warped and bent. He uttered a curse and a ripple swept across the silver plain like a tidal wave, rising, threatening to engulf them all.

“Aggari! Shanshor-tillmonti!” Strange said in a dead tongue. The tidal wave drooped and melted into the silver plain. But Nightmare gestured again and from behind Strange, rising like the heads and necks of prehistoric dinosaurs, came ripping up five tentacles. The tips of the tentacles split and parted to reveal dagger teeth. Strange turned to protect himself, and when he turned, Nightmare launched a beam of light from each finger. The beams solidified and became golden bands which wound themselves around Strange, holding him helpless for the five striking heads.

“Shagorri!” Strange exclaimed. “By the powers of the nameless stone of Shagorri, I banish you!”

The golden bands melted. The attacking silver heads withdrew into the featureless silver plain. Strange staggered. He was exhausted from fighting his way through wave after wave of the creatures Nightmare had sent against him. It was Nightmare’s realm and he drew power from it. Strange was an invader, far from his physical body, extended out into the dream dimension, weakened by the demands upon his energy.

“By the eternal Vishanti!” he said and gestured. Nightmare froze. The last ripples where the monster heads had sunk into the silver plain grew smooth. The sky cleared, horizon to horizon, then everything faded.

Ten

Stephen!

The clouds swept by, distant and untouched.

His mind was tired, his body battered . . .

. . . Stephen . . .

"Stephen!"

Dr. Strange awoke back in his body. Clea was bending over him. "Stephen! Oh, thank the powers! You're back!"

"Yes," he whispered, conscious that his voice was weak.

"Stephen, I was worried, you were gone so long!"

"It's all right," he said, smiling weakly. He put his hand on hers, looking up at her as she bent over him. "It's Nightmare, Clea. He's behind it all."

"Nightmare!"

"The dream dimension. I don't know what he is up to . . . or rather, he's up to the same old thing—invading this dimension—but I don't know how he hopes to accomplish this."

Strange looked across at the sleeping Billie Joe Jacks and his wife. He made a small gesture and the evangelist blinked and awoke. "Hey?" He looked around and, seeing his wife, smiled automatically. He stared at Strange. "Well?"

"I'm not certain, Reverend Jacks," Strange said, rising from his chair. His physical body felt weak; probably sympathetic reaction to the immense drain on his energy when in astral projection. "There *are* dark forces at work here."

"Oh, nonsense," Jacks said, making a disparaging gesture. "That's

hokum."

Alicia, his wife, put a hand on his arm. "Billie Joe, I know Doctor Strange. He wouldn't fool around about a thing like this."

The minister looked at his wife in frank amazement. "Alicia, I would never have thought it of you. This man is a charlatan. Look at all this nonsense," he said, gesturing around at the ancient books and the other paraphernalia. "Show biz, my dear. Look at the way he dresses —show biz; impress the gullible. No Christian would be caught by all this. No, now let me finish. I shouldn't have come here. *You* shouldn't have consulted this . . ." He shot a look at Strange. ". . . This charlatan."

"Reverend Jacks," Clea began, but the minister cut her off.

"I don't want any mention made of my visit here. I'd be a laughing stock. There's nothing wrong with me. I've just been having a little trouble sleeping, that's all. A temporary condition caused by my commitment to the Lord." He stood up and reached down for his wife. "Come, Alicia. We have work to do, work we have neglected for this . . . this nonsense."

"Billie Joe—"

"Shush." He looked at Strange. "Send me your bill. I shall pay it, only because my wife foolishly made this appointment, but I want no more said about this. Understood?"

"Of course," Strange said. He made a slight bow, but his eyes glittered.

"Stephen, I—" Jacks cut his wife off with a noise of annoyance, as he took her arm. Wong appeared and escorted them out. Clea looked at Strange, who seemed to be far away.

"What do we do now?"

Strange did not reply. Clea knew better than to intrude. After a few moments Strange broke his silence and walked back to his chair. "You look tired," Clea said. Strange nodded. "I'll have Wong make us something to eat."

Strange nodded absently. His mind was juggling all the many strange elements of this puzzling case. What was Nightmare's plan? The purpose was clear, but the means were still uncertain.

Wong brought food and Strange ate without tasting what he was putting into his body. Fuel, just fuel. When Clea suggested he go to sleep and rest, Stephen Strange felt a sudden pang of distant fear.

. . . Sleep . . .

. . . perchance to dream . . .

. . . to dream was to lie vulnerable . . .

To be vulnerable was to be defeated, to die.

What had Pushkin said? “Better the illusions that exalt us than ten thousand truths.” Could that be true? Not in the terror world of nightmares.

Tennessee Williams had written, “A persistent dream has meaning, and is sometimes fulfilled.”

Strange stood up and walked to his wall of books. He sought for and selected a volume and opened it to the words of Dr. Michel Jouvey, a famous brain specialist.

“When people dream during the slumbering process,” he read, “they are really not quite asleep nor yet fully awake but in a third dimensional category. Dreaming occurs in all mammals, and to some extent in birds, but not at all in reptiles. Cats spend about twenty to twenty-five percent of their ten-minute catnaps in this dream state, which is about the same percentage that human beings do during their periods of sleep.”

Strange closed the book and replaced it on the shelf. A fifth to a quarter of the time humans were vulnerable. They opened portals to the dream dimension and, in essence, invited Nightmare in. But there must be other conditions to be met, or Nightmare would have invaded earlier, with greater success.

Strange thought of what he had once read, but could not remember the author. “The permanent temptation of life is to confuse dreams with reality. The permanent defeat of life comes when dreams are surrendered to reality.” And Ralph Waldo Emerson had written, “We wake from one dream into another dream.” Joseph Heller had written, “Dreams are merciless: they come upon you when you’re asleep.”

They were all vulnerable. Sooner or later, everyone had to sleep—perchance to dream.

Dr. Stephen Strange turned and strode off to bed.

Eleven

"Master?"

"Yes, Wong?" Strange turned with a slight frown, reluctantly lifting his eyes from a large book.

"A Miss Hartley to see you, sir."

"I don't know any Miss Hartley. Please tell her I am very busy." His gaze dropped again to the arcane formulas of Pournellian logic.

"Why, Doctor, what a blow to my ego!"

At the sound of the melodious voice, Strange looked up. A beautiful woman stood in the doorway. Even the phlegmatic Wong seemed mesmerized by her beauty. She stepped into the room with a charming smile. "I thought *everyone* would know Michele Hartley! How perfectly delightful to discover someone who is not a fan!" She put her purse on the table and walked around the room looking at various objects, knowing it gave Strange a chance to look her over.

What Stephen Strange saw was quite, quite gorgeous. He was not so unworldly as not to recognize the highest achievements of the arts of dressmaking, makeup, and possibly even plastic surgery.

"Thank you, Wong," he said.

The servant withdrew, but at a slower rate than usual.

"Is this anyone I know?" Michele asked, touching a gold-banded skull with a delicate finger. "A producer, perhaps?" She smiled over her shoulder at Strange.

"That was Alantripi, an Atlantean sage."

"I thought Atlantis was a myth," she smiled, turning toward him. Her perfume was faint, but persistent.

"Many do," Strange said. "May I ask what has brought you here?"

"You have, Stephen Strange." She stepped up to him, touched the Eye of Agamotto lightly, smiling, then walked away. She ran a fingertip across the roughened cover of a metal-edged leather box carved with ancient symbols. "I thought perhaps we should meet, you and I."

"And you are . . . ?"

"Michele Hartley."

"I hope you will forgive me, but the name does not . . ."

"They said you might not know who I was." She stopped and faced him squarely. "I am what they call a superstar. I *could* have sent my representatives here instead—my agent, my business manager, perhaps even a studio vice-president—but I thought your status deserved my presence." She shrugged, smiled, and made a little moue with her mouth. "It seems I am not quite as famous as I thought. Please don't tell the people at *Variety* or the *Reporter*. I've gotten *one* Sour Apple Award already—I don't want another."

"Miss Hartley—"

"Ms., please, Doctor." She walked around the table, looking at the wooden globe with its faded maps of an ancient Earth. She stopped by a pedestal that held a silver-embossed statue of the goddess Astarte. "Doctor Strange, I have a proposition to make to you—a business proposition." She smiled again, briefly. Her perfume was lovely.

"You and I, Doctor Strange, could be the biggest thing in films since, since Tracy and Hepburn, Gable and Lombard, Laurel and Hardy, Travolta and—"

"Ms. Hartley!"

She stopped and smiled softly. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Are you proposing that you and I *act* in a . . . a what?"

"A movie, Doc—the cine-mah; the flicks. Ten million three is the budget, Universal will distribute. I can get Goldman to do the script, Orson has expressed interest in directing, and—"

"Miss Hartley!"

"Ms."

"Ms. Hartley, I am not an actor. I—"

"I know that, but we can send you to Lee Strasberg for a few weeks. You have *presence,* Doc—*star* quality. Anyone can see that. *Merlin* will be the biggest—"

"Merlin?"

She looked at him, then laughed. "Of course! I forgot! I'm sorry. No wonder I have a business manager! Merlin the magician, you know? Court of King Arthur, that whole thing?"

"I am acquainted with the mage in question." He looked at her closely. "You are not presuming to do some sort of film about the . . . *no!"* He glared at her.

"Hey, wait a sec, Doc! It's all in public domain. Guy probably wasn't even real. That was fifteen hundred years ago, maybe more. No conflict."

"Merlin! The subject of a *motion picture?"*

"Sure, it's a natural. You'd play Merlin, of course. Say, the special-effects guys will flip out over you! I'm going to play Guinevere, the queen, and we are talking to—get this—*Richard Burton* about playing King Arthur. Camelot, you know? He did it on Broadway. Marvelous, marvelous, especially now that he's off the juice. Getting to the right age, too."

"Ms. Hartley, you had better go."

"Listen, Doctor Strange, we haven't gotten to the best part yet. You and I will have two nude scenes, one where you come by this little idyllic stream and Sir Modred attempts to—"

"Nude scenes?"

"Sure. They even have them in PG pictures now. Discreet, of course, but my public expects it. There'll be one where you summon up the forces of white magic to fight the black magic of Modred, who—"

"Modred was not a magician!"

"And I'll have at least one with Richard, I mean, King Arthur. But don't you worry, they will be tastefully done. All my nude scenes are."

"Ms. Hartley, I—"

"You'll want to know if you, well, can handle a thing like that. Men are far more shy than women, I've found." Without a moment's hesitation, she reached up, touched a button at each shoulder and the pink dress slid to the floor like pink champagne going downhill. She wore nothing beneath it.

"What do you think?" She posed with hands on hips, then pirouetted around to give him a back view, looking at him over her shoulder. "Doc? Still pretty good, huh?"

"Ms. Hartley . . . I think you had better go."

She turned around and stepped close to him. Her perfume was even stronger, mixed with another subtle odor. She put her hands on his chest, to either side of the Eye of Agamotto. "Stephen . . . ?"

His expression hardened. *"Ms.* Hartley, please put on your clothes, and—"

"Stephen!" It was Clea, standing in the doorway with an expression of surprise and hatred.

"Clea, I . . . this is Ms. Michele Hartley. She, uh, came to talk to me about doing a movie about Merlin. You know, Merlin? King Arthur, Excalibur, Morgan le Fey, the Round Table?"

"Is that why she is naked?"

"I'm not naked, Miss, I'm nude." To Stephen she whispered, "Is she somebody?"

"She is Clea," he whispered, then stopped himself and continued in a normal voice. "She is Clea, daughter of Umar, and is my student and . . . uh . . . friend."

Michele looked around Strange at Clea and flashed her a bright smile. "Do you mind? We're rehearsing."

"Rehearsing for what? Caligula and Nero stopped giving parties some time ago."

"Clever, clever. Stephen, tell her to go away. We're talking business."

"Uh, Clea, if you'll assist Miss, uh, Ms. Hartley, I'll be in the, uh, in the other room."

"Oh, Stephen!" the actress said quickly. "Now if I've gone too far, just say so. I just didn't think anyone as far out as you, would be, uh, straight. I'll get dressed."

Strange walked out, not looking at Clea, who watched the voluptuous actress dress. Her expression had become faintly angry, but mostly blank.

"You and Doc Strange live here together, huh?" Michele said, pulling the dress up over her hips and lifting the straps. "Very nice. He's a touch square, but hey, that's not all bad. You ever thought of being an actress? Great figure, you know; oh, of course you know—a girl always knows. That hair, though, that's a bit far out. The cameras and lights will make you *white,* know what I mean?"

Clea did not respond and Michele finished doing up her straps. "Well, there." She took a script from her purse and put it on the table. "Here's the suggested script. Ask him to make notes, will you? Things he likes, things he doesn't? And maybe, well, I've heard . . . I mean, if he could mark places where *he* might supply the special effects. I mean, well, I've *heard* the doctor could, um, *do* things, you know?"

"Did you bring a coat?"

"No."

The two women glared at each other, then Michele started for the

door.

"He isn't coming back, is he?"

Clea shook her head.

"Well, okay. I'll . . . I'll call back, all right?"

"This way, Ms. Hartley."

They left, and a few moments later Clea returned. She picked up the script and read the name across the cover. She walked over and tossed the thick wad of stapled paper into the fireplace. It caught slowly and burned smokily for some time.

Twelve

"No, Mrs. Jacks, I don't think normal medical help will aid your husband," Strange said into the telephone mouthpiece. There was a pause and Alicia Jacks sighed.

"I don't know what to do, Doctor. He's . . . different; caught up in this new crusade. We're going into something very big, you know. The Crusade for Change? You've heard of it?"

"It's been on all the media, yes."

"Going by television satellite all over the world practically," she said proudly. But the pride quickly gave way to the fear she had expressed to Strange. "He's sleeping, but . . . it's not the same. He . . . he just sleeps. We don't . . . I mean, he goes to bed early now, and sleeps very solidly, except . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, umm, it's not that he talks in his sleep, you know? But he . . . he makes sounds. Threshes about. As if it were a nightmare, except I . . . I can't wake him up!"

"You've tried?"

"Yes, but . . . he just doesn't respond; at least not until he's ready. Then he's up and going and full of plans and things to do." She hesitated a bit. "Doctor Strange, it's . . . it's very odd, you know? He'll say, 'I'll sleep on it,' kidding like and then he really does. Mel Knowles —that's our coordinator—wants to know about this or that and . . . and he'll have to wait until the next day. Then Billie Joe, he'll have a real precise answer." Her voice brightened. "But things are coming

along real nice, you know? Got ourselves a marvelous network connection in Brazil. Brazil—imagine that. They speak Portuguese there, you know, but I guess enough speak English. And there's a possibility of Sri Lanka and bits of East Africa, too, by satellite relay. We're just, well, spreading all *over*. This crusade is going to be just, well, just terrific!"

"I'm glad you're happy, Alicia."

A pause, then Alicia Jacks said, "I just hope this is going to be all right."

"What do you mean?"

"I've . . . I've heard him rehearsing his speeches. He used to do them for me, you know? But now he rehearses behind closed doors. But I've heard things and . . ."

"Go on."

"It's a different message. I know he says he's seen the word of the Lord, that this *is* a Crusade for Change and he will be offering that change. He's a *good* man, Doctor Strange, y'know?"

"Why is this new message different?"

"I . . . Lord knows, I . . . it's just . . . I can't put my finger on it, Doctor. But every day he . . . well, he looks a little bit worn out. This is going to be a great strain on him. He's not a kid anymore, you know? But he thinks he is or acts as if he is. Drive, drive, drive, he says, but I don't know. It's wearing him out."

"Do what you can for him, Alicia. See that he gets vitamins and eats well—and sleeps well."

Strange looked at Clea, who looked back from behind hooded eyes. Alicia Jacks apologized for bothering Strange and quickly rang off.

"Jacks is just one man," Clea said.

"And Joe Peerson is another—also that mysterious marksman," Strange added.

"A pattern will emerge, Stephen. You'll see it and act on it."

"If I see it in time," he said.

Thirteen

Strange lay awake in their big bed. Clea was asleep next to him, a satin sheet barely covering a curving hip. The constant murmur of the city outside was barely heard in this shrouded chamber. A stub of a candle still burned, putting highlights on the polished carved wood.

Stephen Strange's thoughts were troubled in the way they are when a name or a fact one knows, but cannot quite remember, hangs there, just out of recognition, tantalizing and annoying. There *was* some sort of pattern in all this, he thought. There had to be.

That is something for another time, he thought sleepily. I'll think about it . . . tomorrow . . .

Sleep came quietly.

Drifting . . .

Fragments; color; whispers; part of a wall; a line from a spell about transmutation; the shrouded faces of vanquished enemies; a gray plain; walls, walls, more walls . . .

Strange was walking along slowly next to a wall, looking around in bemused bewilderment. Where was he? What was this? Why was he here?

The walls were gray metal and very high. Above them he could see the stark angles and planes of a mechanized city. Dark ports opened, cold blue lights snapped on, metallic creatures flew into them, the ports closed. A thin black line etched itself into a rectangle, the rectangle swung open, and a silver-domed human stepped out. He

looked at Strange curiously, shrugged and walked on. The rectangle closed. Strange watched the man with the silver head turn and walk through a gray metal wall. A black sphere floated into view between the tall gray buildings, then sank out of sight.

Strange stopped with his back against the cold gray metal wall. Why was he here? He couldn't seem to remember exactly why he had come there. Or who he was, except in a vague, uninterested way. A port opened near him, creating itself out of nothing, and a slender young woman stepped out. Her head was hairless and the top portion of her skull was smooth silver. She glanced at Strange, seemed indifferent, and walked on. She wore snug-fitting gray clothing and Strange could see the play of her muscles and the sway of her long gray tail.

Tail?

Another black sphere floated into view between the buildings, grew closer and settled down between Strange and the next wall. It was as big as a small house, gleaming black, and heavy. A crimson line appeared, circumscribing a perfect circle, which swung out. A pinkish light illuminated the person who stepped out from the sphere. It was . . .

It was . . .

Strange *knew* he knew the person, but he couldn't *quite* see what he or she looked like. If he could actually see the person, he knew he would know who it was. It wouldn't be difficult. All he needed was a good look . . .

It was . . .

The person crossed the space to the nearest wall and melted into it and disappeared. The plug in the black sphere closed and the ball shape lifted and soared away between the dull metal towers.

Strange walked on . . .

. . . down a hospital corridor. A green-clad surgeon hurried past, followed by attendants moving a gurney upon which a figure lay under a red blanket.

Blood.

Gaping mouth, staring eyes . . . gray skin . . . the color of death . . .

"Strange . . ."

The face moved, the eyes stared, already filmed with the gaze of death. "Strange . . ."

He bent over, the gray bony hand clutched at his shirt front. "Strange ..

"Yes, what is it? What can I do for you? I'm a surgeon."

"Strange . . ."

"Yes!"

"Strange . . ."

"Yes?" he said wearily. It would go on forever, a cycle of frustration and fear.

He pulled loose from the grasp and strode into an operating room. A nurse put a scalpel in his hand. He put the sharp edge of the tool against the smooth, flawless flesh of a body . . .

. . . blood . . .

. . . Clea . . .

. . . he wielded death in his hand, life and death, but he chose death. Others had died under his hand. He had tried desperately to save them, when he had been a surgeon.

She was dying, this woman he loved. He could not stop it. With all his powers he could not stop the hand of death.

He drew back the scalpel. The blood flowed backward, the flesh closed . . . He *could* do it . . . The room changed, then changed again. It was chaotic and confused. A long gray corridor . . . mirrors that reflected things that were not there.

He awoke suddenly. There was a siren off in the distance, its shrill note rising and falling, a deep-throated horn blaring. He wiped sweat from his face and looked at Clea. She had turned on her back, the satin sheet stretched tight across her lower hips. She looked beautiful. There was no incision across the soft smooth flesh of her stomach.

He had difficulty going back to sleep.

Fourteen

"Brethren, I speak to you today from the Temple of Light!" The television screen framed Billie Joe Jacks nicely and the lighting technicians had done him justice. Strange detected the makeup, but that was hardly unusual for anyone on the tube these days.

"Brethren, this hour, this minute, this *second* is the first moment of the Crusade for Change! This world changes on the surface every day. The world we knew as a child is as distant today as Jupiter is from the Sun! The world of our parents has vanished! Technologically, we are changing as swiftly as some speeded-up movie. The minds of men are delving into *everything:* the radio waves coming from distant stars and galaxies which are unimaginably far away, the planets, the structure of metals, and the nature of time itself. There are far too many who know how to explode the heart of the atom!"

Billie Joe's face was stern, earnest, and commanding. Strange saw what there was in this man that had brought him from a small church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, to the worldwide network of stations and satellites that was making this broadcast one of the ten most watched programs of all time.

"Our lives are changing, rocketing into the future at speeds we cannot possibly hope to comprehend. This morning's world is not tonight's world and tomorrow's world is beyond understanding or believing. Man is in danger of being made obsolete by his own headlong progress."

Strange nodded. Jacks was taking the usual anti-technology line. If he had been a caveman he would have resisted fire—probably as a tool of the devil.

"Progress," sneered Jacks. "Each hour that passes brings this planet,

this system of planets, this *galaxy* forty-three thousand miles closer to Globular Cluster M13 in the constellation of Hercules . . . and yet there are misfits and malcontents who insist that there is no such thing as progress.

"Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, 'The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.' And by that test, has our 'progress' been progress?"

Jacks leaned forward into the camera lens. "Has it?" he insisted. He flung a hand into the sky. "I insist that it has *not!* Anything that makes the world more humane and more rational is progress, I say. That's the *only* measuring stick we can apply to it." He settled back and spoke in calm, even tones. "In a world where the two greatest powers —not even counting the others—can each destroy *totally* the lands and populations of the other, *fifty* or a *hundred* times over with atomic fire, I say we have *not* made the world more humane or rational."

Stephen Strange found he agreed, but he kept his caution up.

"Speed is frequently confused with progress, but it is not progress. Some say progress is the substitution of a complicated nuisance for a simple nuisance. Well, my friends, I am here today to make a very progressive suggestion: let us not have any more progress!"

Jacks beamed out at his worldwide audience. "Let us instead have *change.* Change is not progress. Change is not our enemy. What *single* ability do we all have? What solitary ability do we *all* possess? Change."

He took a deep breath. "The world is changing faster than people are. Our problem is that we hate change and we hate progress, and we love them at the same time. Change keeps things from becoming static and boring. But what we *really* want is for things to remain the same . . . but to get better.

"We have only two things to dread: changing . . . and not changing. But you don't change the world—you change yourself. You don't change the men who are learning about microbes or stars. You don't change the men and women who are building machines or discovering processes. You don't stop those who are searching our genes and chromosomes for better people. No, you change *yourself."*

Jacks looked straight into the lens. "And that is the most frightening thing of all. You are the only *you* you know. Without that *you,* you do not exist. To change that *you* is to not be."

Again he leaned forward. "But you *must* change. You cannot help it. You were once young and foolish and naïve. Today you are older, wiser and not so naïve. You know the world is complex, not simple. You have changed. The toughest sort of mountain climbing is getting

out of a rut. Today, we start making those first steps . . . out of the rut!"

"Make your point," muttered Clea.

"Each new plateau reached by the human race has been the result of some change, some maladjustment, some twisting of the silver cord of life. It is no accident that it has been the so-called 'maladjusted' individuals who have been responsible for the ascent of man to higher and still higher levels of comprehension and ability. And I come to you today as one of those maladjusted individuals." Jacks's smile took the sting from his words. He spoke on, confidentially and person to person.

"Progress is merciless. It has no purpose; it just happens. It chews up everyone in its path—and we are *all* in its path—then spits us out and spits out things and events we cannot understand. The only value it seems to have is to make a few people rich. Progress is manufacturing beer cans that last forever, and expensive cars that rust out in three years. Progress is getting you across the country or across an ocean faster than ever before and then losing your luggage. Progress is inventing television, the greatest teaching tool in history, and boring you to death with it. Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backward faster.

"Changing is applying your own God-given intelligence to your life and your world. *Being* changed is what happens to you and me when outside forces force us to be different. But only *you* can change yourself!

"Why should you do it? For the Lord? For me? For society? No! But we shall not survive without changing—not you, not me, not your nation nor mine, not our *world!* To change with change is the changeless state. All things change. This species gives way to that, to one better equipped to survive. But—!" His finger pointed again at the heavens.

"To become a different you, you must find someone you'd rather be! And there is *nothing* in our society that does not need changing on one level or another!"

Stephen Strange was watching with careful eyes, evaluating both method and thought, both meaning and attitude. This was an inspired Jacks, a magnetic personality, one that was certain to gather about him many people. Not just the eternal malcontents who attach themselves to any sort of possibility for change, hoping that when everything is uprooted and turned over they will be on top. No, he would attract the more stable, those who were altruistic, those who sincerely wanted justice for the oppressed and to right the wrongs of society.

"Today! Tonight! This marks the beginning of the change! The world *will* be different tomorrow from what it is right now! Why? Because you have listened. Some of you will turn me off, close your minds, and forget my words. But *some* of you will understand, *some* of you know that a better world lies ahead, *if we work together.* We are doing the Lord's work, we are doing *man's* work! Together, hand in hand, and mind in mind, we *will* change the future! New let us pray."

The camera pulled back, showing the crowded Temple of Light and dissolved to the spire over it as the prayers of the faithful rose. Strange leaned forward and pressed the button; the image collapsed in upon itself, became a dot and disappeared.

"He's magnetic," Clea commented. "You *do* listen."

Strange nodded. He had sensed something more than just the personality of the evangelist. He was not certain just what. He stared at the blank gray screen.

Gray.

The color of clouds—gray.

Nightmare was somewhere behind this, Strange knew, but at just what point did he plan to appear? If he thought to make everyone listening to Billie Joe Jacks fall asleep from boredom and invade on a broad front in that manner, he was doomed. Billie Joe seemed to electrify, not bore.

In fact, Billie Joe Jacks was far more electrifying and commanding than he had ever been—curiously powerful. Strange leaned forward and turned on the television set again, getting a curious look from Clea.

There was a newsman with a hand mike, holding it in the face of a famous Protestant minister, an evangelist who had adopted the charismatic image of a television evangelist early, and had risen to international fame. "—and I applaud the Reverend Jacks for his challenging statement. I want to say, here and now, that I support his Crusade for Change. It is time that—"

Clea spoke over the minister. "Everyone is getting on the bandwagon. They see his effect. Remarkable."

"Indeed," Strange added.

The network had shifted across the country to interview another famed minister. "Carl Eisenberg here with the Reverend Curtis Smith, of the United Protestant Reformed Church. Doctor Smith, what are your thoughts on the first speech in the Reverend Jacks's Crusade for Change?"

"Well, Carl, it is a clarion call for unification, there's no doubt about that. We here at the UPRC have long hoped and prayed for a force to

unite all the Christian factions."

"Thank you, Doctor. Now to Paul Wright, with Richard Cardinal Buttner, in Philadelphia."

Stephen Strange snapped off the set. The silence deepened for a long moment. "They are getting on the bandwagon fast," Clea said.

"Aided by the technology he seems to want to destroy," Strange said softly. But what exactly was the plan?

Fifteen

"Doctor Strange, this is Alicia Jacks."

"Yes, Mrs. Jacks, what can I do for you?"

"I hate to be calling you; I know you must have important things to do, but . . ."

"Go on, please," he said into the telephone.

"It's Billie Joe. He's . . . he's not well."

"Is the crusade taking that much of his energy?" Strange asked. The well-televised crusade had been taking up much of the airwaves for ten days.

"He's . . . weak, Doctor Strange. I've been giving him the vitamins, seeing he gets rest and all, but . . . he's so weak in the daytime. He's . . . he's aged five years. I don't know what to do."

"Would you like me to see him again?"

"Oh, I . . . to be frank, Doctor, I don't think he'd see *you.* After . . . after our visit he was, well, very much against you. He called you—no, I shouldn't."

"Go on, Mrs. Jacks, it's all right."

"Well . . . uh . . . he called you a devil, an acolyte of Satan, things like that."

"And a charlatan, no doubt." Strange smiled faintly. "But what can I do for you. I do not practice medicine any longer, you know, Alicia."

"No, it isn't . . ." She seemed very hesitant. "It's . . . it's not really medical. I think . . . it's . . . oh, I don't know how to put it."

"Psychic?"

"Well, I . . . I just don't know. He *should* be well. He's always been very healthy. We've done crusades before, several of them, that were just as demanding, or almost so, anyway. It's . . . something else, Doctor Strange."

"I'll come see him tonight. You are appearing at Madison Square Garden, are you not?"

"Yes. I'll . . . I'll have tickets for you at the box office. Or would you prefer to come backstage first?"

"I'd like to get as close as possible, yes."

"I'll arrange it. We are scheduled to start at five o'clock, you know? That gives the engineers time to do a bit of videotape editing before we go on the air at eight."

"I understand. Clea and I shall be there."

"Thank you, Doctor Strange. I just know you can help."

Strange hung up the telephone and stood silent for a minute, thinking. Then he went into his library, hunted through the shelves, and found two thick, dusty volumes. He sat down and started searching through their thick parchment pages.

The streets were clogged with cars, taxis and charter buses for blocks in every direction. It was obvious that the Garden would be filled many times over. As Strange and Clea got closer, they could see huge projection screens had been set up beside the marquee and three more had been erected on temporary platforms down the street.

The crowd parted for Strange and his white-haired companion. No one called out in the usual rude New York manner. Their voices fell and they stared, moving aside without jostling, making a path before Strange. The Sorcerer Supreme walked confidently, in full cape and tunic, the horns of his unusual cloak rising above his head in crimson points. The crowd closed behind them and after a few moments their conversation continued. Not one person mentioned the pair that had just passed.

The doorman waved them on, an expression of silent awe on his face, an unusual attitude for someone who had seen costumed rock stars, the world's champions, politicians, and kings come through his door.

"The Reverend Jacks is that way, sir," the guard said.

Strange nodded and continued through the passage formed by the outgoing equipment and scenery of the rock group, The Marvelous Madmen, and the incoming movable ring of the championship fight. There was a line of dressing rooms and only one was lighted. The entire backstage was quite empty, except for a few lounging stage

technicians and several quiet television cameramen. There was a muted rumble from the direction of the vast main floor, where thousands of the faithful were filing in. Strange saw in the corner a row of card tables set up, with middle-aged men and women behind them, each with a ledger, an adding machine, and a metal box.

"Doctor Strange? Oh, I'm so glad you are here!" Alicia Jacks hurried across the room. She glanced upward, at the filling auditorium. "We're going on soon. Oh, excuse me; I've been with Billie Joe so long, we've done so much together, I still say 'we.' " She twisted nervously at her wedding band. "Lately, I'm afraid it hasn't been 'we' at all."

"Is he ready to see us?" Clea asked softly.

"Well, uh . . ." Alicia glanced at the dressing room. "He's taking a nap now. He always takes one just before, uh . . . he needs the rest, you know? He hasn't been lookin' well. Guess I told you that, I'm sorry." She looked at her watch. "I better wake him. Come along."

Strange and Clea followed Mrs. Jacks to the dressing room, where she briskly knocked twice and opened the door. Strange had a quick glimpse of Jacks lying on the single bed, his body arched with tension, his fists knotted at his side, his face contorted in an expression of terror and fear, his eyes bulging. Alicia gave a gasp and instantly Jacks collapsed. His body thumped down into the bed limply, his eyes closed, and his limbs relaxed completely. He looked asleep.

Alicia gave Strange a pleading look and went into the dressing room. "Billie Joe? Honey, it's me, Alicia?"

The man on the cot stirred and his eyes opened, one at a time. "Oh, hello, my dear. Is it time?"

She gulped and glanced over her shoulder at Strange and Clea. "Uh, yes, it is, dear. Billie Joe, there's someone here to see you . . ."

Jacks sat up, yawning, a hand over his mouth. "Now, Alicia, you know I don't like to see anyone before, not even the media people, not even Barbara or Walter. After, dear, after."

Alicia moved aside and Jacks glanced out the door and froze. "What's *he* doing here?" He glared at his wife. "Alicia, I told you this man is a fake. Worse than that, he's liable to attract the television people. Look at him! It's a wonder he isn't on the six o'clock news *every* night! Or locked away in some funny farm!"

Jacks stood up and stepped quickly to the door, reached out and grabbed it, then slammed it shut in Strange's face. He turned to castigate his wife when he realized the door hadn't latched and was swinging open again. Angrily, he turned and did it again, this time carefully latching the door. Again the door swung wide and Billie Joe Jacks was face to face with Dr. Stephen Strange.

“Strange—*if* that’s your name—I don’t want to have anything to do with you. You are the very opposite of everything I represent! I don’t like you. I don’t mean to be unChristian, you understand, but it is in us all to hate the Devil!”

“Have you been sleeping well?” Strange asked mildly.

“No, but what business is that of yours? I expect to make sacrifices for the cause! I’ll go on making sacrifices until we have triumphed! Until the Crusade for Change *does* something about this world we live in!”

“Oh, I’m sure the world will not be the same if you succeed,” Strange said. An expression crossed the sorcerer’s face that Clea could not define. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you before a performance,” Strange apologized.

Jacks glared at him with an icy expression. “It is not a performance —though perhaps *you* would not know the difference!” He glared at his wife. “Get my suit ready, I’ll change now. You’ll excuse me, I’m sure,” he said with heavy sarcasm and reentered the dressing room. This time the door stayed shut.

Strange turned away and Clea matched his pace. She looked up at him, frowning. “Stephen? You sensed something?”

“Yes, I did, Clea. There are strong forces at work here. But I cannot fully comprehend their direction. Jacks is a focal point; that much I know.”

There was a flurry of activity at the backstage door and a big Negro entered, striding like a black king, with a number of people asking for his autograph and calling out his name. The big man walked on without paying them any attention at all. Strange pulled Clea into the shadows. The black giant strode purposefully to Jacks’s dressing room and knocked, then entered without waiting.

“I know him,” Clea said. “That’s Joe Peerson, the heavyweight contender.”

Strange nodded. “And the one I saw in Billie Joe’s dream.” Clea glanced at him in concern. Strange looked around. “The other? The dark, nameless one? Where might he be?”

Sixteen

The shadows were deep in the cavernous underground. Only a few lights had been lit, for only a few people were there. Billie Joe was a one-man show, a show with no more scenery than a plain lectern and a simple setting of platform and flowers. It was theater-in-the-round for the Crusade for Change. 'Round the world.

They heard the murmur of the crowd above them, then a squeak as some stagehands began moving some of the rock group's bizarre scenery. A castle wall was trundled across and set down, blocking their view of the dressing room. Annoyed, Stephen Strange and Clea started to step around the flat, but a second group of stagehands brought in the massive prize ring, set on edge, the canvas covering a tawny wall. Clea gestured at the "castle" gate just in front of them and stepped forward to open it. The painted oak panel swung easily into the blackness; Clea stepped through. At the very last instant Strange sensed something and cried out.

"No, Clea!"

It was too late. The door swung closed and although it was but a moment before Strange shoved it open, everything had changed. No longer was there blackness beyond, but simply the other side of the underground staging area: the dressing rooms, the scenery, a forklift truck, some television people swapping stories.

Strange spun and closed the door after he had passed back through. Quickly, he put his fingers to the Eye of Agamotto hanging at his chest. "O great Eye, pierce the veils of mystery, reveal my student and love to me!"

A light sprang out from the Eye, projecting a beam onto the fake castle door. He saw Clea, not in color, but in black and white, reversed

like a negative, floating in the purest white space. He saw her hands gesturing, saw her lips moving but heard no sound.

"In the name of the dread Dormammu! Open the way to the region of wonders!"

The Eye blinked out. It seemed very quiet. The painted stone castle no longer looked painted. Strange reached out; the castle door was heavy now, creaking as it swung heavily open. Beyond was neither blackness, nor the dressing rooms, nor the pure white sea in which his beloved Clea was drowning. Beyond was a medieval-looking corridor of shaped stone, gray and cold. The corridor was lined with archways and each archway contained a thick wooden door; on the face of each door was burned a cryptic symbol.

Strange entered the corridor without hesitation. The incantation had not taken him directly to where Clea was imprisoned and there must be a reason. He was alert, strong spells of protection ready on his tongue.

The first door opened easily at his touch, swinging away to reveal an emerald glade beyond. A well-trod path led from the archway through sunlit grass to a nearby forest of ancient gnarled trees. At the edge of the forest, just beyond a dusting of yellow flowers, a golden-haired woman, young and slim, held out her palm to a white horse with a long twisted spike growing from its forehead. The unicorn snorted and raised its head to look at Strange with a wild eye. The young woman shaded her eyes and frowned. Strange shut the door.

The second door opened into another forest, but this one was dark. Black-trunked trees with somber foliage, shadowed passages between, a lightning-struck tree burned and twisted, rough gray rock, no flowers, only a little grass. Beyond the treetops Strange saw the broken tower of some castle. It was burning. He closed that door.

Crossing the passage he opened a third door. Howling wind sent a flurry of snow into the passage. The cold froze his face as he peered into the wild whiteness. Something huge and dark rose out of the snowdrift and made a lunge toward the door, snarling, hairy hands extended. Strange yanked the door shut but the clawed paws grasped it and wrenched it open again. It bellowed and started through but met a burst from Strange's outstretched hand. The creature was blasted back, its chest on fire, and threw itself into the snow. Strange slammed the door shut.

He approached the fourth door with even more caution. It was well he did, for the moment the door opened, something wet and splotched heaved itself against the oak. Stephen Strange shoved back with all his strength, but pseudopods of blotched protoplasm flung themselves through the crack and attached themselves to the stone floor. These

tentacles split and some curled toward Strange while others extended themselves and stretched toward the farther walls. The door sagged inward. A massive blob of the stained protoplasm bulged through the door.

"By the supreme Satanish!" exclaimed Strange, his fingers moving. Flames suddenly enveloped the tentacles, which jerked, then contracted swiftly. Other tendrils of protoplasm came through the door, but they, too, started to burn. The blood flowed back out, followed by the extended tentacles. There was a thin high whine which wavered and disappeared when Strange slammed the door closed.

The fifth door Strange eyed with apprehension. He looked down the long corridor. It seemed to go on forever. There were hundreds of archways with their recessed doors, each an opening into some odd dimension. It might take him forever—but there was no other way to do it. He opened the fifth door.

Blue sky. Nothing but blue sky and a few faint, distant clouds. Strange looked down. The door opened into the side of an incredibly high cliff. The mountainside dropped for thousands of feet, a fluted granite wall without vegetation, ledge, or sign of human habitation. The origins of the cliff were lost in a thick white mist far below. Strange started to close the door when there was a horrendous screech. A pterodactyl came slanting out of the sun, its long beak open, its long leathery wings flapping. Strange swung the heavy door shut but it shook with the assault of the prehistoric beast as he closed it.

The sixth door opened into desert. Nothing moved; there was the trail of a snake wiggling across the slope of tawny sand.

The seventh door exploded with tons of water the moment Strange lifted the metal latch. He was slammed back into the opposite wall and the water poured in with a deafening roar, spreading out, filling up the corridor swiftly, pinning Strange against the wall.

"Crimson bands of Cyttorak!" he shouted, his mouth filling with foul-tasting water. A green tentacle, one side covered with pulsating suckers, came in and reached for him. "Banish this flood!"

There was a sizzling as scarlet bands arced across the stone archway. Water squirted through the slits, but the bands closed upon themselves, severing the massive tentacle, which lay twisting and writhing on the wet stone as the rest of the water swept on down into the drains and scuppers. The bands sealed themselves across the arch and no more water entered. Strange stood up, weak from the physical assault of tons of water, and closed the door. The corridor was a mess. Strange spiny fish twisted and gasped. Purple seaweed lay in long

sinuous lines. The watermark on the walls was almost above Strange's head.

"Flames of the Faltine!" he exclaimed. There was a searing flash and the long corridor was dry. The bits and pieces of flotsam and jetsam were seared and fell into powder, including the big severed tentacle. Strange's clothes were dry. He stepped wearily toward the eighth door.

"Clea, Clea," he muttered.

The oaken door swung open and Strange looked into a treasure chamber in a natural cavern. Ancient rectangular chests had round golden coins spilling from them. Fistfuls of pearl necklaces and armloads of golden bracelets clogged other caskets. A strange six-sided box was open, revealing thousands of tiny glowing octagons of blue metal. A crown studded with emeralds, far too large for any human head, lay atop a shattered crate that held an Aztec statue of solid gold. A spear of transparent crystal was topped with a long metal point carved from a ruby. A cask of silver globes was next to a rotted bag of 1888 U.S. silver dollars. A Wells-Fargo strongbox was next to a studded bronze chest with the graven symbol of King Sumuabi who had ruled Babylonia in its first dynasty more than 4,000 years before.

Three skeletons lay disintegrating among the treasure. Only one was human.

Strange shut the door, took a breath and crossed the passage to open the ninth door.

Stars—but none he knew. A gas cloud loomed red and awesome before him, lit by the light of a million suns. Not far off was a red giant. Just before the door floated a pure-white cube. Strange looked at the cube thoughtfully.

White. Clea had been in a white world, a negative world. The box was small, no bigger than might hold a hat; purest white, featureless, reflecting no starlight. Antimatter? Would that explain the negative whiteness?

"By the seven rings of Raggador," he said softly, watching the box carefully. "Fetch me that box." He gestured and seven glowing rings flew from his fingertip, each no bigger than a finger ring, but they expanded to be large enough to contain the box. They wove themselves around the box in an intricate web and slowly tugged the white box closer.

The rings set the box upon the floor and Strange expanded the rings to mansize, a cage of glowing filaments. "Open," he commanded.

The box opened, but not in the way he thought. The square lid did not swing up, but instead the sides contracted into themselves, until there was but a skeleton of white lines in the shape and size of the

box. Within the box, floating in the exact center, was a white ball, smaller than a tennis ball, and featureless.

"By the dread Dormammu, I command you to reveal your secrets!"

The white ball pulsed and turned transparent. Within the ball was a universe of stars; pinpoint dots of light, millions of them, making the ball glow. Peering closer, Strange could see that the dots were not stars but tiny pinwheels of galaxies. It would take him a million lifetimes to search even a portion of it.

"Return," he said. The ball turned white. The sides of the box rolled down. The crimson bands returned the box to the unknown region of space, and Strange closed the door. He hesitated, and almost reopened the door. Clea *could* be somewhere in that pocket universe, he thought —but no; her prison was a negative universe.

He stood before the tenth door. He opened it carefully. Beyond was a red-lit sky and a stony path leading over a hill toward distant spires. The road was lined with hundreds of human skulls. On the hilltop a dead woman hung naked, upside down, from an inverted cross. He closed the thick oak door.

Eleven. A burned and ravaged landscape, blackened and savaged by terrible rays which had cut deep gashes in solid rock. The ruins of a domed city still burned. A tall skeletal machine with six jointed legs turned glistening lenses toward him. One of its legs was bent and twisted. There was dust on its black metal carapace and rust at the joints. A turret on its rounded back swung a wide-snouted weapon toward him. Strange slammed the door shut just as the weapon spurted out a stream of liquid fire.

Twelve. The air was a muted dirty orange. Thousands of people in shapeless gray clothing stood apathetically in endless lines. Featureless walls rose above them and Strange could see the bars of light that denoted buildings beyond, barely glimpsed through the thick murk. No one looked at him; no one cared. An old woman gasped and fell. No one paid any attention. Strange closed the hatch.

Thirteen. A mystic number.

Kong was atop the Empire State Building. The blonde woman screamed. The biwinged planes swooped and banked, their machine guns chattering. The great ape roared and swung out a hand, snatching one of the flying machines from the air, crushing it in his monstrous hairy hands. Spots of blood dotted his body. Red gore oozed down his black fur. The great creature reached down and lovingly gathered up the screaming blonde woman. She fought ineffectually against his immense strength. The ape swayed, bellowing. If he fell, he would take her with him.

Doctor Strange was about to utter an incantation when out of the

sky came a solitary figure dressed in checked tweed, his Inverness cloak flowing behind him like a cape. “Holmes!” the woman gasped. The hawk-nosed man rocketed around the giant ape, who turned in bufuddlement.

A dark figure ran out onto the observation platform from the elevator, his slouch hat and black cape flapping in the wind. Two .45 automatics appeared in his hands. He began firing upward in thunderous blasts.

The flying man in the deerstalker cap banked sharply and flew in close, pulling the screaming woman from the puzzled gorilla’s grasp. The extra weight pulled him off balance and they fell out of sight, the woman screaming hoarsely. The giant ape stepped down to the observation platform, squashing the shadowy figure with the blazing guns under his foot.

The top of the gorilla’s head opened and a plump young man with a thick droopy mustache started climbing out. He looked over at Strange, his dark eyes gleaming, and made a leap straight toward him. Strange managed to get the heavy door shut just in time.

“Madness,” he muttered, “a realm of madness.”

The fourteenth door.

A forest wilderness, thick-topped trees as far as he could see. A butterfly flopped by and the scale suddenly changed. The butterfly was not a butterfly but a humanoid figure with wings three meters long and rainbowed with color. The trees were not just trees, but towering growths as large as office buildings. Vast thick limbs held out whole villages hundreds of feet over the mossy green floor of a vast forest. The villages were mud and wattle, much like hornet nests, but the edges of the arched doorways and oval windows were intricately carved with designs. Winged figures fluttered from opening to opening. One flopped in, bearing a huge flower. Another rose up, carrying long green grass, which it took to a nest in progress.

Strange closed the door reluctantly. It was a lovely fragile world, but not the one he sought. Neither were those worlds beyond the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth doors—barren worlds, shattered rock, melted ruins. The eighteenth door opened into an enormous hall with high colorful walls. All across the blue-marble floor were copulating couples, their human bodies glistening with sweat. On a dais opposite the door was a wide throne, flanked by voluptuous women who wore no clothes, but much jewelry. They watched the orgy with impassive faces. Sitting atop the throne was a lounging insect as large as an elephant, six-legged and black-brown. Each long hairy leg was ringed with golden bracelets and a golden band circled its bulging head just in back of its protruding eyes.

The insect king twitched and its limbs went rigid. There was a thin undulating whistle and from arches came muscular warriors in chain mail. Their arms went back as one, and they hurtled black spears straight at Strange.

"Calthor, protect me!" The spears flipped over in midair and arrowed straight at the insect king. The huge creature scrambled to get out of the way, its long legs sending the flanking beauties flying; but it was not swift enough. The spears plunged into its nightmarish body, and the creature screamed. Yellowish fluid oozed forth and the monster flopped over, crashing back onto its carved throne. It twitched and kicked out; then it was motionless. Slowly, the copulating couples stopped. They lay atop one another, motionless, then they began to rapidly decompose.

With a feeling of revulsion Strange closed the door. The corridor *was* endless. It was infinity itself.

Dr. Strange stood before the nineteenth portal. He had to go on. Whoever—or whatever—had abducted Clea into the white universe might destroy her. Her powers were not those of her mentor. Perhaps she might be able to hold off the abductors, but not win freedom. He *had* to continue. He could *not* give up.

Behind the nineteenth door was a tropical island, serene and lovely. Brown-skinned maidens in low-slung sarongs laughed and called out to him from the clear waters of the lagoon. He wanted desperately to go and lie there in the sun and not think, not fight, not struggle against the infinite varieties of evil. But the very thing that gave him his awesome powers was the thing that forced him to close the thick oak door and go on.

Twenty: an emerald city in the distance, a path twisting through flowers, music in the air.

Twenty-one: jungle, fetid and hot. A planet of incredible size loomed over the horizon. Here and there from the thick green jungle a ruined temple or pyramid protruded.

Twenty-two: blackness—and the fetid stench of rotting flesh.

Twenty-three: a blue room with shiny walls, a humanoid male with shaven skull and fiery eyes wearing a lavender jumpsuit. His hand grabbed for a chromed weapon as he snarled defiance.

Twenty-four: a boarded and battened town, weathered and quaint; the Silver Dollar Saloon next to the Apex Hotel. Down the dusty street two horses stood with drooped heads. One horse had a hoof lifted, as if the street were too hot. Nothing moved; a fly buzzed; someone in the saloon laughed.

Twenty-five: a wide-beamed ship with crimson sails emblazoned with an intricate cryptic symbol moved at a slant over swelling

waters. The carved and painted woman at the prowl had naked breasts of unexplained fullness and pointed nipples. Her head was that of a feathered bird.

Twenty-six: Strange looked into a cluttered room where a number of people sat on folding chairs. Many were bearded and wore army-surplus clothing. A woman crocheting was the only one that saw him and she blinked in surprise. The others were busy auctioning off parking places in front of the building.

Twenty-seven: Strange stood wearily in the arch. The sun was red, giving everything an odd rusty cast. A fortress was nearby, sturdy and unimaginative, made of red stone and its walls topped with pink points. There were bloody heads on almost every point. At the foot of the walls were skeletons in rusting armor. Black birds flapped near the heads, pecking at shreds of rotting flesh.

Twenty-eight: glistening city, all chrome and crystal and smooth surfaces. Delicate bridges linked domes and pyramids and ziggurats. There were gardens where natives strolled, but the natives were gray-green reptiles in silken robes.

Twenty-nine: moonscape, dead and undisturbed. A planet rose above the horizon and seemed oddly familiar. It stopped Strange long enough for him to recognize the world. It was Earth, a billion years before, when all the continents were one, with cracks just beginning to show. Man had not yet been created, and immense reptiles roamed the volcanic plains.

Thirty: a featureless checkerboard plain that ran to the horizon. Nearby, directly before the gate, was a wide blob of pale jelly. The spots within the jelly stirred and Clea rose from the blob, naked and lovely, her legs and hands attached to the flowing blob. Strange uttered a curse and the blob exploded, sending Clea splashing across the checkerboard.

Thirty-one: a hundred tiny large-headed robots scampered past, each bearing a load of some sort. *Buzz. Beep. Brak. Bonk. Beep-beep.* A myriad of walkways threaded the city that lay before Dr. Strange. The towers loomed up above the maintenance levels where the robots scurried. He caught glimpses of sky-cars and thin bridges and curly-headed figures strolling slowly, dressed in pastel fabrics.

Thirty-two: a courtroom of some sort. An ancient and wrinkled man in black robes and a tall crimson hat sat above the other six old and wrinkled men in black, who wore blue hats. Above them, on the wall, was a portrait four times the size of a human, only the portrait was of a dog. Before the judges, in chains, was a slender young girl.

“Death!” the judge said and the others nodded. A muscular man in black, masked and wearing a silver chain around his neck, approached

carrying a long curved sword. Others in black forced the girl to her knees. One took her hair and yanked on it, stretching out her neck. The swordsman raised high his weapon.

"By the stones of Sarradani! Freeze these men!"

The sword stayed high. The slender girl wrenched her hair free and stared at Strange. "Run, girl!" he said. She leaped to her feet and ran to him. He slammed the door when she got through and turned toward her.

She was cringing against the opposite wall, staring at him with wide eyes. She was blonde and pale, not pretty, but with a certain grace and obviously intelligent. "It is true! They said the Say-tan would rescue me! It means I *am* a witch!"

"No, no," Strange said. She cringed as he approached and would have bolted if he moved closer. Strange cursed to himself. He had no time to spend on her. Clea was in mortal danger. "They think you a witch?" he said and she nodded, looking around. He suspected that in a moment she would bolt for one of the doors. Dormammu only knew what might lie beyond. He made a subtle gesture and murmured a few archaic words.

Her manner changed. All fear vanished from her face and she looked around her brightly. "Where is this?" she asked. "It doesn't look like Radzi or even Quade."

"No, it isn't," Strange said. He put out his hand and she took it. He walked with her back along the corridor a ways and thought: she would like the tropical paradise, but would confuse those who lived there. The same with the door leading to the American West of yesteryear. He stopped. So many were hostile or lonely. The emerald city beyond the twentieth portal, perhaps, only he did not know for certain what might lie there. He shrugged and turned back. "Come with me," he said.

"All right," she said brightly. "Where are we going?"

"To where you will like it."

She screamed when the thirty-third door opened. Beyond was hell, with a clawed, winged creature sitting on a throne of flame.

Strange calmed her with difficulty. The thirty-fourth door was before them and she was trembling, looking across the hall at the closed portal. She took a deep breath and clung tightly to Strange's hand. He opened the door.

It was like a mirror. They saw themselves, sorcerer and accused witch—only they changed at once. They aged with incredible swiftness. The bloom of youth faded in seconds. Her body thickened and sagged, her eyes grew rheumy, her hair scraggly, and she became

putrefaction. Strange saw his own image swiftly age, die, and rot.

"It's just a . . . a dream," he said to her as he closed the door.

"But . . . but . . ."

"Yes, I know, it looks real. Well, it *is* real, but it isn't *this* reality. Look, we'll try another door."

"What are you looking for?" she asked breathlessly.

"My love."

The girl looked up at him, sadly, seemed about to speak, but didn't.

"All right," she said, squaring her shoulders.

The thirty-fifth door was much better. A kind of Macy's parade was going by. The street was full of cheering people dressed in bright colors, all wearing some kind of symbol, either in jewelry or woven into their clothes, or embroidered upon them. It was a circle with a slash through it, something like a side view of Saturn. The buildings across the street soared up out of sight, shiny and smooth. Over the heads of the crowd Strange saw windows heaped with strange products: crimson balloonlike things, blue shafts that tapered, green chalky sticks, purple cloth, yellow cubes, white crystals.

But it was the parade that caught the girl's attention. She cheered along with the others as the entries in the bizarre parade went by. A dragon made of transparent material, floated, bobbing, with a beautiful nude woman swimming in blue liquid within it. A spiny thing like a blowfish, only two stories high, walked on longer spines. A robot, all orange-metal legs and attachments, squirted out rose-colored liquid that hardened in the air and became candy. A tall, dark-haired man floated on a silver disk, dispensing wafers of chocolate-colored something. A troop of Napoleon's artillery . . . a balloonist in a top hat and burgundy suit . . . a long-nosed green creature who looked solemn and profound and rode in a carriage drawn by enthusiastic human volunteers . . .

When a tall float came by, blaring music, squirting candies, dripping flowers, the girl could not contain herself. She released Strange's hand and ran through the portal before he could stop her.

Everything slowed and stopped. The light dimmed down through the spectrum until everything was bathed in a sullen red light. The solidifying candies hung in the air, dropping with infinite slowness. The girl herself moved as though in very slow motion.

Time slowed and all but stopped.

Stephen Strange didn't bother to take the time to figure out why. He brought his hands together and meshed his fingers before him, arms out. "Father Time, ultimate goal of all things, release this child! By the thirteen bells of Bellok!"

The girl moved backward, step by step, until she was again next to Strange. The parade, too, moved backward. The candies became liquid and slowly reentered the spouts. Then the girl's fingers interlocked with Strange's and the parade continued forward.

She looked up at him, smiling brightly. "Isn't it *beautiful?"*

"Yes, but we must search on."

"By the way," she asked as the door clicked shut, "I don't know your name, kind sir. Mine is Ramma-delforadarra, daughter of Delfor-carra-tumathador and the Cavar of Alcala, Gillum-yeh-jarra."

"Mine is Stephen Strange."

"May your yamma always be clear and your hulta dry."

Strange smiled. "May yours, too."

She laughed. "Don't be silly. Girls don't have yammas!"

"Oh. Well, I'll call you Ramma, all right?"

"Of course, Stephen," she frowned. "What else *could* you call me?"

"Door thirty-six," he said.

Her eyes widened. "Thirty-six is a sacred number."

"All numbers have significance," Strange murmured.

A sunbaked plain, cracked and parched, stretched from the door to the horizon. Horned skeletons that were not cattle dotted the ground. Much further toward the sun was something that looked like a shipwrecked sailing vessel of thin metal.

Thirty-seven: lightning was the only illumination. Blue-black rocks stood up from a motionless lake or sea. Something flopped and disturbed the mirrorlike surface.

Thirty-eight: a small, dark-haired girl in a blue dress was sitting under an immense pink mushroom talking earnestly to an impatient goat. The girl looked up, gestured toward the pink and blue and ocher mushrooms behind her and said, "You can have any of them." To the goat she said, "You've got to try harder, Crollin."

Thirty-nine: a tall skinny man wearing shabby lavender clothes rode what looked like an Easter egg with hairy legs. He stared at Strange and the girl, then ducked his head shyly. "I'm sorry, don't hit me, I didn't mean to stare." The Easter egg slowly turned its hairy head and neck and looked balefully at Strange.

"Grot," the Easter egg said.

"Shush, Tremlin," the tall man said.

"Excuse me for bothering you," Strange said.

"That's all right. Oh, wait!" Strange stopped closing the door and looked back. "Would you mind telling me how you know the language? You don't look like you're from around here."

"We're not," Strange said.

"We pick up things fast," the girl said and *she* closed the door. "He's an odd one," she said, and skipped across to the fortieth door.

Beyond was a dry grassy plain. A chipped monolith was standing very close in front of the door. On top was a sphere of weathered stone. On the side facing the arched doorway was an inscription. It looked like Arabic but wasn't, nor did it seem to be any language Strange knew. Something seemed to be burning; it was in the air. What was burning stank.

Forty-one: an asteroid, hollowed out for living quarters; stars beyond; a couple of good-sized rocks nearby, a small blue-white sun. An airlock opened and out came a wormlike creature in a clear spacesuit. "Ugh," Ramma said and closed the door.

"How many are we going to open?" she asked.

"As many as we must," Strange said.

Ramma sighed and looked down the long corridor. "What about something to eat?"

"Soon," Strange said, reaching for the latch of number forty-two.

It was a lovely world, grassy and graceful. Slender trees rose up in small groves, with larger ones beyond. They had limbs that spread out into a many-fingered support for what looked like uneven ovals of thick moss. Broad-leafed bushes were giving birth to bright-colored flowers. The green grass sloped down to a small bay, an inlet of a wide lake. Purple mountains were on the other side. A dock of shaped stone stuck out into the bay and there lay a wooden ship of closely fitted timber. The bright red sails were furled and on the decks were broad-shouldered humanoids loading bales of pressed flowers and baskets of seeds and nuts.

A Strange and Ramma watched, a number of humanoids came out of the forest and toward the ship, singing and dancing. They played stringed instruments, had no clothes except thick striped socks and were bald except for elaborately arranged topknots.

"They'll have something to eat," Ramma said. She started forward, then stopped and looked at Dr. Strange. "May I?"

Strange searched the landscape before him. On a headland across the lake was a round-topped tower of rose-colored stone. There seemed to be no weapons. The singers and dancers had sighted them and were staring, not in fear or surprise, but as if they thought they should recognize Strange and his companion, and didn't.

"All right," Strange said. "You'll be all right here, go on."

She gave him a dazzling smile and ran out happily. Strange watched her join the throng of singers and they seemed to accept her without

reservation, though a few plucked curiously at her clothing. Strange shut the door slowly and took a step away. He stopped, feeling just a touch apprehensive, and stepped back to pull it open again. Everything had changed.

The young saplings were now tall, thick-bodied trees. The tower of rose rock was now three towers, with walls between. The stone dock was still there, but much mossier. There was no ship, nor singers or dancers. There was only one very old woman, in a dark-blue robe, sitting on a wooden seat in a circle of paving that had not been there seconds before. She seemed to be asleep.

She trembled, then awoke with a start, looking around until she saw Dr. Strange. "Stephen!" she said. "I *knew* you'd come back some day!"

Strange blinked. "Ra-Ramma?"

"Yes, of course." She peered at him carefully. Her hair was gray, shaved into a topknot and bound with blue ribbons. "Why, Stephen, I don't think you've changed a bit! I *knew* you were a magician!"

"Ramma, I . . ." There were so many questions.

"Oh, I wanted to thank you for bringing me here. It's been so nice. I have forty-nine grandchildren, would you believe that? My first son was named Stephen, you see. He died, of course, fighting the screamer." She gestured toward the tranquil lake. "We're all very proud of him."

"Ramma, you're . . . you've had a good life?"

"Oh, the best, Stephen, the very best. No one here hates anyone . . . unless, of course, they've made a perfect yakka of themselves and then you'd expect that, wouldn't you?"

Strange smiled. "Ramma, I've got to be going. I'm still searching for my love."

"Oh, you'll find her, Stephen. I just hope she's not an old yulla like me, though." She sighed deeply. "I *do* wish I could go shell finding again, out by the silver rocks. Well, I had my share." She looked at Strange and her toothless mouth bent in a smile. "Good yallooning, Stephen."

"Good yallooning, Ramma."

"Oh, you silly person. I can't yalloo."

Strange closed the door and sighed. The forty-third portal was before him. He was reluctant to open it. There seemed to be an endless number of dread fates just beyond the mysterious oaken panels. He reached out, opened the door and slammed it shut before it was open more than a few inches.

The entire opening was a mouth, pink and wet, with a long snakelike tongue that darted toward him, slapping the closing door

with a great flapping sound.

Stephen Strange took a deep breath and stepped to the next door. He glanced down the hall. It diminished in perspective until the walls seemed to merge. There were an infinite number of arched doorways set in stone walls.

Forty-fourth. He was on a balcony, looking down into a small town. There was some sort of bazaar on the street that passed below. Striped awnings alternated with others sewn or dyed in bright artistic blotches which shaded the sauntering natives from the harsh yellow sun. A tanklike machine rumbled past, raising a little dust. A dragon the size of a large horse limped along wearily, pulling a two-wheeled cart in which lounged a fat man in a purple robe and a conical blue hat. The cart was filled with long, slender blue fish. Fat-domed pots held fires and brown-skinned women sold black sausages to passersby. A tall man in leather armor led a coffle of slaves along the street, their necks linked by a chain. The slaves looked hungrily at the sausages. An unusually tall woman with balloonlike breasts and a towering crimson headdress strode by and was deferred to. An artisan hawked pots in the shape of a multibreasted woman. A helmeted soldier with a long sword casually slapped a child out of his way. The child tumbled, but did not cry, and quickly scurried into the crowd.

Strange closed the door. The universe was indeed a varied one. The forty-fifth door showed a large brown-orange desert seen from a high angle. Thick towers were all around, but most were in a state of advanced decay, cracked and crumbling. A muddy stream, not much more than a trickle, wandered through broken walls. A red-robed priest knelt on a prayer rug, disemboweling a cat.

No Clea. Strange leaned against the wall and thought. Would Clea's odd origin have any bearing on where she might be?

Seventeen

Strange had met Clea during his great battle with the dread Dormammu. That sorcerer from a strange dimension had threatened the invasion and destruction of the dimension in which Stephen Strange dwelt, Earth. Strange had gone to that bizarre and surreal time-space dimension, a dimension so alien, so incredible, so utterly beyond human comprehension that there were no words in any earthly language to accurately describe it.

He had faced Dormammu, a powerful figure whose head was a glowing, steaming pillar of mystic force. “You must never be allowed to hurl your sinister spells against mankind,” Strange had told him, but the mystic magician had laughed at Strange’s assaults.

“Even the powerful Ancient One cannot stop me, so how can *you?”* With a wave of his hands the ribbons of that dimension parted, twisted, disappeared, reunited in a bizarre Mobius strip, altering space and the perception of space. But Strange had resisted, barely, the altered state of mind his opponent had created.

“I warn you to send the Ancient One to fight in your stead,” Dormammu had snarled. “You are too young.” His voice and manner were insulting, and Strange felt the sting to his pride. “Your knowledge of the mystic arts cannot begin to equal *mine!”*

Black, white, red, green, blue . . . The universe changed with bewildering rapidity.

“No, dreaded one,” Strange said. “It is *I* the Ancient One has sent . . . and it is *I* you must battle!”

The Mobius world flattened in a blink. Grotesque statues sat squatly, sacrificial smoke rising from their head bowls. Bizarre shapes hung from the arching black ceiling. Dormammu stood on a gleaming golden square and sneered. *“Bah!* All through the ages, witless creatures such as you have dared to challenge me . . . and all have met the same deadly fate.” His green-gloved hand pointed a finger at Strange and the glowing force that was his head shimmered. “I shall give you a brief period to reconsider before I summon you to your final battle!”

Dormammu raised his hand, his long fingers stretched. “For I no longer derive *pleasure* from defeating weak opponents The sport now bores me!” Dormammu’s hand swept down and in the blink of an eye, Stephen Strange was somewhere else.

He looked around. He was in a hall with a pool of thick green ooze, surrounded by massive pillars that rose into the darkness. The pillars were carved and inscribed, painted and covered with mosaics, arcane designs, and mystic symbols. He took off his cape and commanded it to stand while he strolled along the golden floor which edged the erratically shaped pool.

“He sounded so sure of himself,” he thought. “So totally arrogant! Can he *really* be so completely unbeatable?”

Every man has areas of uncertainty, especially where he has not been tested. Dormammu’s certainty struck at Strange’s own insecurity. He had to decide whether the master of this bizarre dimension was really as powerful and as knowledgeable as he appeared. David slew Goliath. Power and knowledge alone were not completely the deciding factors. There was still will, determination, righteousness, and right.

He was deep in thought when he noticed a spot glowing in the air near him. As he looked, the spot dilated to permit a woman to step out of it and stand on the floor before him. She was the nameless woman who had tried to warn him when he had first entered that dimension of the dread Dormammu. He would know her eventually as Clea, but then she was mysterious and nameless.

“Heed my words, man from another world,” she said urgently to Dr. Strange. “You must not battle Dormammu!”

“You waste your breath,” Dr. Strange said. *“Nothing* can stop me! I must save humanity from the dreaded one.” He turned away from her, annoyed that Dormammu had tried such a transparent and ineffectual trick. “Even though I perish in the attempt, I dare not falter. *My* life means nothing.”

"No!" Clea said quickly, her voice filled with concern. "It is not only of you I am thinking. If, by some unbelievable miracle, you should triumph, it could mean the end of us!"

"I do not understand," Strange said.

"Then you must be shown!" Clea said. Her eyes burned into Strange's. "Prepare yourself, Earth mortal . . . Prepare for sights such as no human eyes have ever before beheld!"

Her hands went out, directing her energies. Dressed in red and black, with distinctive white hair, a red radiance came from her body. In the midst of the radiance a yellow spot appeared, grew into a shimmering rectangle. Strange could see into it, floating unsupported in the air above the golden floor. Down the rectangular passage, lined with shapes that shifted and merged, was a pure whiteness. "Let the entrance appear," Clea commanded, and the rectangle grew rapidly. "The entrance to . . . the *beyond!"*

She looked at Strange with a challenging expression. He nodded, but all his senses—especially his sixth sense—were on full alert.

"Follow me then," she said, "and be prepared to witness the incredible!" They floated up from the floor, side by side, and quickly entered the yellow rectangle.

"I must be vigilant," Strange thought. "It might be a trap. Yet, my instincts tell me she is sincere."

They floated into the pure-white world, into a world of total madness! Tubes of protoplasm, or something like it, writhed through the endless space. There were webs and blobs, floating openings into other worlds, spiny extrusions, dangling tentacles . . .

"This is but the start of the eerie spectacle you are about to see," Clea said. "For these are the outskirts of Dormammu's domain, where the mindless ones dwell."

They floated out, through traceries of smoke, past tubes and tentacles of pulsating, writhing protoplasm. "The mindless ones?" Strange inquired.

"Yes," she said and pointed. "There they are!" Ahead, on a floating island of quivering protoplasm were two great humpbacked manlike beasts. They were fighting, with hamlike fists and with blasts of some sort of ray coming from slits in their wrinkled featureless faces. They fought with unceasing ferocity, and Strange could see reinforcements coming through, climbing out of the openings into this world, their fists clenched.

"They are primitive, savage, totally devoid of love, or kindness, or any type of intelligence," Clea said. "They live only to fight . . . and to destroy." One of the monsters seized another and flung him from the

floating island. The defeated creature fell a great distance, caught a throbbing tube of protoplasm and at once began to climb back to begin the fight again.

"They have lived at the fringe of our dimension since the beginning of time," Clea said, "ever waiting for a chance to attack us . . . to slay us all!"

They floated on, but they came too close. One of the gray creatures sent a bolt of energy at them. Strange thrust Clea aside, causing the mindless one's beam to miss, and he sent back a blast of his own. They slipped past the creatures but Strange wondered why these powerful entities had not conquered all of that dimension before.

Clea explained that a powerful shield, placed by Dormammu with a great spell, kept the creatures confined. "If anything should happen to him, then all of us in this dimension are doomed," she said.

Strange sensed that this white-haired enchantress was telling the truth. "Though he represents a menace to mankind, Dormammu is a protection to his own people," he thought.

"That is why you must not defeat him," Clea insisted as they swam back through the wavering rectangular passage to where she had come to Strange. "Only *he* can save us from the mindless ones!"

"Yet if he lives, humanity shall always be in danger," Strange replied. "I wish to bring no harm to this fantastic world . . . and yet my first duty is to Earth . . . and the ones who inhabit it." He felt sad, but he knew he had no choice. He had to be true to his oath.

Clea disappeared into her self-made passage and Strange shrugged into his long blue cape. He waited, thinking, but was still surprised when a white glow appeared, then grew to a silent shimmering explosion of light. A red carpet snaked out like some even-edged tongue and Dormammu's voice boomed out.

"Come, man of flesh and blood! The time is here!"

It was Dormammu's summons. Now, Strange knew, the die was cast! The battle was about to begin. He stepped onto the red carpet and it sucked him into the explosion of light.

The first thing Dr. Strange saw was Clea, on her knees, her hands encased in enormous metal balls, linked by a chain, her head down. "The girl! What have you done to her?"

Dormammu's glowing head spouted more steam. "She knew the penalty for speaking to the enemy! She has betrayed me . . . So, her fate is now linked with yours!"

Strange protested. "But she merely tried to help—! To convince me not to fight!"

"Silence!" exclaimed Dormammu. "First, she shall witness your

defeat . . . Then, she shall be the next to die! Dormammu has spoken!" He raised a hand. "Now, let the battle begin! The battle which shall end, as have all those in the past, with the complete victory of Dormammu, master of the dark domain!"

His hand slashed down and yellow ribbons of energy coiled out, divided, divided again, then streaked toward Strange, but the master of the mystic arts spun a spell of his own that deflected the rays of light.

I know now that I have made the right decision, he thought. *No matter what the consequences, Dormammu is too powerful, too evil, to be allowed to exist!*

Flames were met by a mystic shield. Arching spears of energy were deflected. *No matter what the cost or consequence—he must be destroyed!* Radiant force was met by impenetrable might. *But, he shall see that I, too, have magical weapons.* He swiftly spun a cocoon of light-force around Dormammu, but it lasted only seconds, not long enough for Strange to consolidate the advantage.

The cocoon melted away and Dormammu spoke. "So, human! You are a more capable foe than I had suspected! All the more pity that I shall be forced to vanquish you!"

The battle raged on. Spell met incantation; force met resistance. Glowing symbols were drawn in the air and erased with another powerful spell. Curse met curse; realities were shifted, the surreal became the norm. The battle raged between two completely alien foes, foes with only one thing in common—an awesome mastery of the powers of magic!

In a silent retreat in the Tibetan mountains, an aged mystic observed every detail of the fateful confrontation. He was the Ancient One.

"There is no turning back now," he whispered. "The game must be played to the end." He closed his eyes and prayed. "May the light of the Vishanti shine upon Stephen Strange . . . and may the omnipotent Oshtur grant him wisdom and strength!"

Dormammu's attack grew stronger and Dr. Strange was pressed to his limits. *Try as I may, I cannot break through his defenses. I cannot find a way to reach him!*

In Dormammu's mind was this thought: *I am stronger than he, but never before have I seen such courage . . . such valor. But neither courage nor valor alone are enough to prevail against my superior might!*

In the mind of the helpless Clea was this thought: *It matters not who shall win . . . In any event I am doomed! It will soon be over. The mortal*

one cannot survive much longer!

The great battle raged across the length and breadth of the dark domain. But unknown to Strange at the time, the battle had weakened the shield that Dormammu had erected to confine the mindless ones. They broke through while Dormammu's attention was elsewhere. A vast horde of the savage, ruthless creatures spilled into the domain of Dormammu.

Suddenly Strange saw Dormammu break off his attack. "I shall attend to you later, Earthling!" Dormammu said as he turned away. "I see a more pressing problem to dispose of!"

The master of the dark domain turned his back on Strange and lifted his hands high. A radiance of light grew around him, and Strange knew he could pierce it from behind, but he hesitated. *It is my chance . . . but I cannot do battle in such a manner.*

Then the mindless ones charged into view, their beams slashing forth from the dark slits in their heads; but Dormammu had created an emergency barrier before them. Their beams splashed off, but as their numbers increased, the beams began to penetrate, further and further, into the barrier.

"Back, creatures of the night!" Dormammu shouted. "Back, I *command* you, by the seven rings of Raggador!"

The creatures multiplied and Strange could see that the quickly erected shield was not going to hold. He knew that if Dormammu's barrier was ruptured, many innocent creatures living in the dark domain would be killed. He had to help.

His fingers went to the jewel at his throat and a light shone forth from the enchanted amulet. "Stand still!" he ordered Dormammu as the light bathed him. "Let the power of my amulet seep into you, adding to your own!"

Fortified by the energy from the gleaming jewel, Dormammu's strength increased and the barrier held. Then with an outward pulsing of light he drove the mindless ones back and back, until they were once again confined in their mystic prison.

Then instead of expressing gratitude, Dormammu turned upon Strange with rage. "Curse you, mortal! Curse the fact that I needed your help! Curse the woeful fate that has placed me in your debt! I cannot slay you now! I cannot destroy the one who has saved me!"

Strange smiled grimly. *It is as I suspected,* he thought. *He is evil, true, but only by our human standards. According to his own lights, he has his own moral code.*

Strange acknowledged that Dormammu was in his debt, but he asked only two promises to be kept and the debt was paid: that no

harm must come to the female he had imprisoned for trying to help, and that Dormammu vow never to invade Earth.

The master of the dark domain agreed. “But I shall never rest until I have avenged this indignity!” Then he was gone.

Strange turned to the white-haired young woman, now freed of her metal balls of bondage. “What will become of you, now? Perhaps there could be a way to take you back with me?”

But Clea had refused, saying she preferred staying in her world—but that she would never forget Doctor Stephen Strange.

Reluctantly, Strange departed the dark domain, and returned to the Tibetan monastery of the Ancient One. There he found the old man amazingly revitalized. Strange’s defeat of Dormammu had broken a spell the master of the dark domain had put upon him. As a reward Strange was given a new cape, with great spells woven into it, and a new and more powerful amulet, the fabled Eye of Agamotto.

Strange shook his head. There was no clue there, in Clea’s origins, for her present whereabouts—or none that he could detect. She had eventually come to him, exiled from the dark dimension, and they had built a life together.

Distressed, Strange ran through the entire sequence again, quickly. The Ancient One had dispatched Strange to do battle in Dormammu’s own land. Strange had had to fight his way through foe after foe, just to be able to meet Dormammu. Reason had not worked, not against Dormammu’s determination to conquer Earth. Clea had tried to warn him, and eventually her warning had borne fruit, for in aiding Dormammu to defeat the mindless ones he had placed the mighty magician in debt to him.

But none of it, *none* of it, offered a clue. If Dormammu was behind Nightmare’s action, if he was in some way manipulating Nightmare, that horrendous dream master did not seem to know it.

No, the clues were obscure. Perhaps they were there, perhaps not. Strange knew of no other way to proceed than the way he had been proceeding: onward.

Eighteen

Strange inhaled deeply, pulling air deep into his lungs, energizing himself. The corridor was long and fraught with danger. If it was something conjured by Nightmare, it would not be easy. Nightmare would put many obstacles in his path, many dangers, even more tricks. But there was nothing else to do. He must search for and find Clea.

He *must.*

The forty-sixth door: a Roman senate, a group of toga-clad senators, their eyes surreptitiously upon one, a lean, hawk-faced man wearing a crown of laurel wreaths. Suddenly one of the senators pulled out a Colt .45 and blasted the man in the purple-edged toga. The man staggered, his eyes wild; blood splattered. Others of the Romans pulled weapons from their robes and the air was hazy with smoke and deafening with the simultaneous thunder of the pistols. The laurel crown fell away as the man dropped under the barrage. He muttered something to one of the men, and died.

Strange closed the door thoughtfully. A twist in history. Like the reality of Kong and the odd switch on that. Fictional characters became flesh and blood, real historical characters have their reality sharply changed. Caesar still died, but in a different manner.

Door number forty-seven.

A roughly spherical, semitransparent blob floated just a ways off from the door. Metal bands circled it and pressed in deeply. The bands were fastened together by a vertical device, knobbed and studded with lights. Beyond the floating blob was a bleak landscape of grays and

blacks and dirty whites, slab-sided mesas, fluted plateaus, alkaline deserts.

"Orrrrkk!"

The thin scream of sound came from the creature and little jets fired, bringing the thing toward the archway. It was as if it had waited there for centuries, waiting for the door to open.

Strange slammed it.

Forty-eight. Is there no end? Strange thought with irritation and considerable weariness.

Human heads dotted a sandy plain as far as he could see. They were buried up to their necks and he recognized some of them as friends. Others took longer; they were people he had known in his youth, or at medical school. He heard the thunder of hooves and saw a troop of red-coated cavalry coming over the horizon, whooping and shouting, heedless of the heads beneath their feet.

When they got closer, leaving a bloody trail behind them, Strange saw their faces were all the same, and they were all his.

"Stephen!" It was Clea, just below the door, her white hair blowing in the wind, up to her neck in the sand. "Save me!"

Strange knew it was illusion. The figures on the horses, wearing Strange's face, galloped on, destroying, killing, maiming. Stephen Strange slammed the door and leaned against it.

"Illusion!" He knew it was illusion. It *had* to be illusion!

Door forty-nine: a dark-gray stone statue of a seated astronaut topped a massive pyramid. Nearly naked worshipers cowered at the base, their offerings bright and bloody on the lowest steps.

Door fifty.

Hooded men rode huge fish in purplish water. The men trailed bubbles and the fish wore jewelry. There was some glass or protection between Strange and the water. There was a hint of a group of lighted domes far off, beneath the sea.

Door fifty-one.

A vast fleet of starships drifted past a red sun. The ships were enormous, bubbled with domes, spiny with tall, tapering metal masts capped with swiveling weapons. There was no hint of Clea.

Strange's enforced calmness was wearing thin. Time was moving. There was no telling where Clea might be. Strange needed help.

"The Eye of Agamotto . . . show me Clea, my beloved . . ."

The medallion on his chest floated free from its frame and rose, shimmering, to stick to Strange's forehead.

A spot of light within his mind grew and grew until it was

everything. Within it was Clea . . . Black hair, gray skin, white pupils staring from black eyeballs—a negative!

A rasping curl of sound reached his ears and then the image flickered. Horned beasts, flights of birds, overflowing garbage bags, newborn babies, a soundless nova—all flickered in and out with Clea's negative image, until she was gone and the rapidly changing mind image showed nothing but the endless variety of the universe.

But Strange had learned one thing. The Eye floated back to the frame hung from a chain around his neck, clicking quietly into place. Strange sprinted down the corridor.

Sixty . . . sixty-seven . . . seventy . . . seventy-five . . .

Seventy-seven.

Strange halted, his hand going out toward the door, then it stopped. He drew back his hand. "By the mighty Srak of Thoris, defender of the door into death, I command you to open!"

The door rattled, then slowly swung open. Beyond was the purest white.

Again, the long garbled cry, vaguely human and decidedly plaintive.

"Gorath! Sagor, the Salaquin of Talmuth! Oshtur the Omnipotent!" Strange's protective spells wove a sphere of strength around him. Then, for the first time, Strange stepped across the portal of one of the doors.

Heat . . . cold . . . pleasure . . . intense pain . . . Brilliant bursts of ebony black assaulted his eyes. Salt, autumn leaves, the stench of burning flesh struck his nose. Every molecule of his body was brought to a peak effect, screaming at him with energy: we hurt, we exalt, we are stressed, we are pleasured, we are, we are, we are . . .

"Clea!" The name came out of Strange's mouth as a garbled harsh sound. "Clea!"

Again, he heard the gurgling, hissing sound. A voice, but was it the voice of Clea? It sounded like a monster.

Something black and gleaming twisted out of nothingness and struck at him. A wave of his hand and circles of green sprang from Strange's fingers, much to his surprise—they should have been crimson. Furthermore, the protective spell did not work.

The black shape bit into him and a wave of sheerest pleasure startled Strange. He moaned in ecstasy, in involuntary reaction. "Shalnor!" he cried, breaking free of the savage clutch of the creature. "Shabboth the Great!"

The black gleaming thing was vaguely snake-shaped, but with great flapping wings. It twisted and struck back at Strange. He heard a cry of warning and turned swiftly. A red creature like a thick-legged

spider was coming down at him. A striped squat thing swam toward him, a greenish mouth yawning.

"Itnahsiv!" he cried and a quiver went through the attacking beasts. "Ruthso! Rrotlav! Mihpares!" The words stumbled awkwardly from his mouth, but they caused a quick retreat in the attacking horde.

Strange watched with grim satisfaction as they writhed, wiggled, and hopped away into the enveloping whiteness. He turned at the faint harsh cry. "Clea! I'm coming!" The words were awkward and rough. He sensed where she was and went toward her.

Her reversed image swam out of the whiteness and her hand reached toward him. They touched and a bolt of psychic energy flashed. Clea was again in her normal colors, unreversed.

"Stephen!"

He blinked, then looked at his own hand. He seemed normal, and *she* was normal . . . and the space around them inky black in every direction. "No," he gasped. "It should not be!" The realization struck: he had become one with the reverse dimension. Instead of perceiving it as negative, he saw it as positive.

He was trapped!

Nineteen

"Stephen, I took a step and *fell* into this! Everything was white and *things* swam in it!" She pressed herself to him. "Thank Oshtur you are here and everything is all right."

"No," he said heavily. "It is worse than ever." Quickly, he told her of the reversed polarity.

"But you must have a spell, a . . . a . . ." She looked aghast.

"I escaped those creatures by calling upon the dark powers, but reversing their names—which made them positive to the creatures and evoked their powers—but now, something failed. You should have joined me and we could have left; but now, I've joined you."

"Where's the portal?"

He gestured. A fiery rectangle, curved at the top, glowed in the blackness not far off. Clea tugged at his arm. "Then let us *go,* Stephen . . ."

"No. If we passed that arch we would disintegrate. We are antimatter now."

"Then why did you not explode when you came here, or me, for that matter?"

"You mere protected by a spell from Nightmare—we assume it is Nightmare—and I carried my own protection. But that has been dispelled. It was a trap. Nightmare knew I would find you and the trap was made very cleverly. We are *both* trapped here."

Clea thought hard. She had originated in a dimension alien to that of the realm of man, one ruled by the dread Dormammu. There she

had seen countless odd things. Something tugged at her, some faint memory crying to be heard, some solution.

"But I shall try," Strange said. "By the seven rings of Raggador, by the thirteen lights of the Cycle of Fire, I order our release!"

Black flashes exploded in the ebony vastness. The most dense of darkness swirled, black on black, but they did not leave.

"By the hoary hosts of Hoggoth, by the fiery centurions of the stars, I order our release!"

Nothing. The black void rippled silently, but they were still there.

"Ancient One!" he cried. Clea looked at him, startled, for Strange only called upon the spirit of the Ancient One in the most dreadful of situations.

Space heaved and split for a fraction of a second, showing white fire, then it was all dark again. There was a somber note, low and forbidding, echoing through the void, a deep resonance from some strange bell.

There was a peal of laughter, quavering on the edge of insanity. It sent chills over Clea's skin.

"No, Strange," the voice said. "You cannot escape. You *cannot!"* Again, the mad laughter burst forth.

"Nightmare," Clea said. She was frightened, yet calm without. The moment of battle had arrived.

"Show yourself," Strange said.

"Of course," Nightmare said, appearing above them in a bubble of green light. "It would be most discourteous of me not to." He laughed again, mockingly. "So, Strange, you have joined us here? How gallant of you! The hero to the rescue! I knew that absurd emotion of yours would spell your final defeat!"

"Not final yet, Nightmare!"

"Oh? Well, no matter. Soon, Strange, soon. I am needed elsewhere. There are a million souls who are going to bed now thinking of my puppet and providing me a door into your world."

Strange flung forth his hand and lightning shot like a missile toward the green-clad Nightmare. The electricity splashed off the bubble of green light and Nightmare laughed again.

"Losing your punch, quack? Well, I leave you now to a lesser being, one of equal stature to yours. We must fight fair, now mustn't we?" The bubble faded and was gone.

"Lesser being?" Clea asked aloud, looking around. They floated in oppressive blackness. With no points of reference it was chokingly close. Attack could come from any quarter and they did not know what kind it would be.

“The lights of Ashur-nadir-ahe!” Strange said, flinging a sudden spray of light from his fingertips. The dots expanded as they flew out, becoming glow bulbs. They lit very little, but they gave Clea and Strange some sort of reference. They were no longer in suffocating blackness, but hung suspended in a void that had size and even direction.

There was a blood-curdling scream and from behind them, sweeping in through the global network of glowing bulbs, came a figure from the troubled dream of a madman. Monstrous and scaly, clawed and bat-winged, slavering and bug-eyed, it roared down at them like a demented dragon.

“The shield of Shalmanser!” Strange exclaimed, calling upon the magician king of ancient Assyria. The dragon-thing ran into an invisible wall and smashed itself to a bloody pulp. The blood and gore ran down an invisible slope and pooled itself into a gravity-free ball of glistening red and white. Then the ball spread itself out into a thin membrane that deepened in color and became brown and furry and seeped right through the shield of Shalmanser.

“By the blood of the Bithnian knights,” Clea shouted, “I command you to stop!” A quiver went through the spreading furry membrane; two eyes grew in the center, yellow and malevolent—but still it came at them.

“Adadnirari, Sargon, and Mutakkil-Nusku! Summon your warriors of the silver swords!” cried Strange.

The glowing balls of light expanded into dark-visaged warriors in thick leather and metal armor, with long shields bossed in silver. Their hair was thick and oily, their skins dark, their short swords gleaming. Without hesitation they attacked the furry brown membrane, hacking at it with cries and grunts.

The brown membrane uttered a thin high scream from each severed portion of its flesh. It shrank back, pulling away from the swordsmen, who followed bravely. A tentacle grew out from a side and engulfed one of the Assyrian warriors, rolling him up in a brown ruglike extension. The warrior screamed and was dissolved into blood and torn flesh. The brown-fur tentacle flung away the bent shield and broken sword and reached for another.

Strange grabbed Clea’s arm. “Come,” he said harshly, and they moved through the blackness toward an unseen spot which Strange sensed was the portal into the mysterious corridor. The corridor itself might be an illusion, a trap set by Nightmare, but it was their only hope.

The furry membrane contracted still further under the onslaught of the bearded warriors, but suddenly it sped away, faster than the

warriors could pursue. It was not retreating, however, it was cutting Strange and Clea off from their escape.

The warriors returned to glowing balls of cold light and kept pace with Strange. “Ishtar preserve us,” muttered Clea.

“Loosen the arrows of Ariarathes!” Strange exclaimed, calling upon the warrior king of Cappadocia. Flaming arrows shot from the network of glowing lights, stabbing into the furry creature. The flames spread across the matted brown coat. The eyes retreated, the creature screamed and became a blob of molten rock. Which flowed toward Strange.

“By the wall of Hasdrubal, the ruler of Carthage!” Strange exclaimed. The leading edge of the lava solidified and the still-molten rock flowed over and under it, held by the invisible force of Strange’s spell, and solidified.

“What *is* it?” Clea asked.

Strange did not have time to answer, for the lava became water, and rushed on at them. The water became meteors, which Strange deflected with a wave of his hand. The meteors shot past them and Strange and Clea sped on.

The meteors curved around; merging, they became a human figure. “The Ancient One!” Clea exclaimed, startled by the image of the Oriental mage.

“No,” Strange said. He sent a blast force from his right hand and a net of illusion from his left. The blast against the frail figure blinded the creature to the enveloping net. The lines of psychic force wove quickly around the stunned “Oriental” and imprisoned him . . . for a full second.

The creature burst through the force field and became the dark-robed image of Death—the skull face, the sharp scythe, the striding walk.

“Who are you?” Clea asked as they retreated cautiously.

“Call me . . . your bad dream.” The skull face laughed, a dry, dusty, hollow noise. The scythe cut through the air but missed, and Strange stood in its path.

“Hold!” The creature froze, the weapon drawn back for another slash. “By the ring of Solomon, by the golden scarab of Sneferu, by the staff of Tai-tsung—I command you to stop!”

The figure of Death did not move. It stood frozen in time and space. But from behind the tall figure came another, robed in white, lightly bearded and ascetic, with a benevolent smile on his face. “Peace, my son,” the man said.

Without a second’s hesitation Strange leveled a pointed finger at the

Christlike apparition and sent a blast of searing force at it. The figure withstood the blast, but stayed frozen, hand uplifted in the gesture of peace.

The sound of jolly laughter came from behind the still statues of Death and Christ, and a fat man with a white beard and tunic and tights of brilliant red, edged with white ermine, emerged. “Hello, hello, hello,” he boomed with great amusement.

Strange was not amused. “It won’t work,” he said and another blast of psychic lightning struck and froze the figure.

“What next?” Clea asked.

What next was a baby, undiapered and toddling, bubbling laughter on her lips. Hands outstretched, blue eyes happy, it made its unsteady way straight at Clea and Strange. The Sorcerer Supreme did not waste a moment. Clea gasped as Strange fired another searing bolt that disintegrated not only the baby, but all the other frozen figures.

“Clea! This way!” Strange cried. Clea took one look at the fading specks of light where the child had been, and followed.

It seemed a great distance but they finally saw the round-topped rectangle of light that was the portal back to reality. It seemed normal, a window in the blackness to the softly lit stone corridor. Clea arrowed gratefully toward the light, but Strange stopped her.

“No, Clea!”

She looked at him in surprise, but he seemed lost in thought. “I became ‘real’ in this negative dimension, a trick of Nightmare’s. If we go back, we are antimatter, remember, and anything we touch will destroy us.” He held out his arms to her and she moved within the enveloping protection of his cape.

“Say this with me,” he said. “Saddhatissa, Vatuka and Siva!” She said the words after him. “Abu-djafar El-mansur, Yazid the Powerful, Al-muktadi the Merciless.”

Space seemed to flow around them and flecks of white spun before their eyes. “Micombero, Nyamoya and Burundi!” The white blotches grew, spinning and merging. “Sumuabi, Hammurabi, and the unknown lord of Kassite!” The spinning white blotches spread out to encompass the void. The space was mostly white.

“Enib-Adad, Adanirari, the Tukulti-Ninurtam son of Shalmanser!” The white had driven out almost all the black. There were only small explosions of black here and there, fighting back. “Jeroboam! Zimri! Amaziah!” The blackness was gone; there was only the white of the negative dimension.

“We can leave now,” Strange said and they drifted to the portal and were through. Strange glanced down the long corridor. At the end was

a blackness. It approached them swiftly, eating everything before it. Strange looked toward the other end; it was too far. He had come past many doors and they could not make it back in time.

Strange took Clea's hand as she stared at the exploding blackness and pulled her directly across the corridor to another portal, seemingly selected at random. Strange pointed his finger at the symbol burned into the wood of the door. Some sort of symbol appeared on every door, yet he had found no correlation to the dimension beyond. But his finger now traced a design in the air and the wood smoked as he burned in another design, obliterating the one that existed there.

Strange yanked open the door and shoved Clea through only seconds before the silently exploding blackness disintegrated the section of corridor where they had stood.

Beyond the door Clea gasped. They were in Strange's study in the Greenwich Village mansion. The symbol he had burned into the wood was his own, the pronged shape worn on the front of his tunic.

Twenty

"It was so unreal," Clea said. "Yet . . . very real." She shook her head in confusion. "And nothing was more real than Nightmare." She shivered, hugging herself, and leaning against Stephen Strange.

The fire in the grate crackled. Stephen had put on soft music to soothe her nerves. They needed a moment of rest, and of planning.

"Nightmare was more real . . ." Strange said softly, his eyes lost in thought. "There's something there . . ."

"Well, in a way, it was *all* nightmare time, Stephen."

"Yes, but you felt Nightmare was more real than the rest of it."

"Yes, but he was, after all, the focus of everything. I naturally paid him more attention."

"No, there might be something here that is below your conscious mind; you may have sensed something . . ." He put his fingers to his lips and pondered.

"Nightmare has always tried to invade our dimension," he said after a few moments of thought. "His whole purpose seemed to be to become a reality here, where nightmares are not real. There must be a reason."

"I've never understood that," Clea said. "He's the ruler of the dream dimension—the undisputed ruler from all we can gather. Here, he is certain to have opposition, not only from you, but from many others. What could he gain?"

"A good point, Clea. What *can* he gain? Or, to put it another way, what does he *lose* by staying in the dream dimension?"

"Lose?"

"Why has he been trying so desperately to escape the dream

dimension?"

"Escape? Stephen, I thought he was trying to invade us, to add our dimension to his. Perhaps even fuse them in some way."

"That may be where we have made our mistake in the past. We *assumed* he was attempting invasion, *not* escape. Perhaps this dimension is the only one he can escape *to*. Perhaps his dimension exists *only* because ours does. Someone has to do the dreaming, after all. At any single moment on Earth there are millions of people asleep, and most of them are dreaming. Nightmare has a source of power there."

"You mean, as long as people dream he exists, the dream dimension exists?"

"Perhaps. It seems a reasonable hypothesis."

"If everyone stopped dreaming, then the dream dimension would vanish?"

"Again—perhaps. We are working in the unknown here. I believe it would certainly be weakened—or perhaps starved would be a better word."

"Then why is Nightmare trying to escape? Surely there is no chance of humans stopping dreaming?"

"No, there must be some reason of which we know not. Perhaps . . ." Strange's voice trailed off for a moment as he thought. "The clue might be your feeling he was more real than the rest. Perhaps Nightmare feels that, too! Perhaps his 'realness' has made him different from the rest of his dimension . . . or that his own perception of reality has changed by his constant contact with us."

"Maybe he feels he is becoming a dream himself," Clea suggested. "Becoming too much of an *un*reality." She looked up quickly. "Stephen—the white universe he put me in, the negative universe—there may be a clue there. In the dream dimension itself what would be the most unreal thing of all?"

"Reality!" Strange said quickly. "Clea, this may be it!"

"Nightmare is, or is becoming, more real—if only in his mind. That means that in the dream dimension he is becoming *un*real! *That's* why he seeks escape. He may be Nightmare here—and nightmarish—but he is more real here than *there!"*

Strange's smile faded. "Yes, but how does he intend to accomplish this? He has been here in our reality before, if only for a temporary stay. I have always defeated him, in one way or another."

"He may have conceived a new way."

"Through people like Jacks and Peerson and that mysterious rifleman?"

“Through their dreams.” She leaned forward and looked earnestly into Strange’s face. “Stephen, dreams are his only weapon—dreams and illusions. When are Jacks’s television programs broadcast?”

“At night. They are taped and broadcast into each time zone at night. Yes, I see your point: night, when people normally sleep.”

“Jacks is the wedge by which Nightmare hopes to enter our dimension.” She sat back, a frown on her face. “But there are so many that would oppose him.”

Strange spoke softly. “But there are millions he might be able to control. Millions will hear Jacks’s broadcasts. What if there were something going out in addition to Jacks’s words and ideas? Some kind of signal, or message, or . . .”

“Umm . . . Millions of ordinary humans would have power that even the greatest of the superheroes might be unable to handle. And even superheroes sleep from time to time.” She shivered and once again hugged herself.

Dr. Strange suddenly stood up. “Where is the newspaper? There was a listing of the cities in which Jacks was to make a personal appearance. Six cities, if I remember correctly.”

Clea helped him find the paper and they searched for the news report of the cities in which the Crusade for Change would have massive rallies.

“New York, Chicago, Toronto, Charleston, and Nashville. Oh, and Charleston, again, only instead of South Carolina, it’s Charleston, West Virginia.” She looked up at Strange. “It’s a bit odd, isn’t it? That’s not exactly a big city.”

“No, but look at the pattern. Five cities with one in the center.”

“A pentagram!”

Strange bent to look at the schedule. “Tonight is the last night—he’s appearing in Charleston, West Virginia!”

“The center of the pentagram! Then it’s tonight!”

“Come, we do not have much time,” Strange said, turning toward the door.

“We are going physically?”

“Yes—we are more powerful that way and I feel we will need every bit of our skill.”

They went quickly to the balcony of their mansion and Strange wrapped them in a spell of invisibility. There was no use attracting more attention to themselves than necessary, or generating more UFO reports. They rose effortlessly into the late-afternoon light, cleared the buildings around them and aimed directly southwest.

They had the Appalachian mountain range to clear, then over the

wooded hillsides of the Alleghenys at five thousand feet. The sun was setting as they arrowed down from the Allegheny Plateau toward Charleston, West Virginia.

They swept invisibly over the city, heading toward the largest auditorium they could see. There were a number of large trucks parked next to the building, all television mobile units. An immense portable antenna had been erected on a flatbed truck, which would be used to broadcast the signal to the communications satellite that would rebroadcast Jacks's sermon to the world.

They came to earth between two trucks, returned to visibility and strode out, toward the stage entrance. Black cables snaked out the door, which had been blocked open with a sandbag, spreading to each white truck. Inside, at banks of monitor screens and at the big professional tape recorders, sat directors and technicians. All the networks were there, either as a news-gathering team, or as the prime broadcasting facility.

"Wait a minute there, you two," a burly rent-a-cop said. "No one goes in but authorized . . . uh . . . oh . . ." He stepped back and gestured them in, his face smoothing out from his authoritarian frown. Strange had made but a slight movement of his expressive fingers.

Backstage there was organized confusion. Men wearing head mikes muttered to unseen others, checking clipboards and looking harassed. Stagehands went by with awed looks. They were not used to this kind of worldwide responsibility in Charleston, West Virginia. Strange saw two network reporters from opposing networks chatting. He kept their attention elsewhere as he and Clea went down the steps marked *To Dressing Rooms.*

"Stephen, darling!" They turned and looked back. Michele Hartley was coming toward them, a black mink coat open and flying like a cape. Her dress was red, low cut and clinging. "Darling! How perfectly marvelous!" She took Strange's arm and stepped between them, turning him so that his back was to Clea. "I've been *so* busy! I'm doing postproduction on *Phantom Lover* and preproduction on another film." She tugged him back toward the stage, her breasts tight against his arm. "But I haven't forgotten *Merlin,* darling. It will be simply marvelous to work with you! We'll be in England for six *months,* Stephen, just you and me, won't that be just *super?"*

"Ms. Hartley—"

"Michele, please call me Michele. May I call you Stephen, Stephen? Please forgive me. The industry is like that. First names right off. If I met the president it'd be George or Abe first thing, I just know." She pulled him into a huddle. "Darling, I've *got* to see you—alone. Perhaps we could, ah, see each other soon? *Real* soon? My Rolls is at the side

entrance. Silver Cloud, with my initials on the side, very small."

"Miss Hartley . . ."

"Ms. Or Michele. Please?" She smiled brightly up at him.

"Ms. Hartley, I have important things to attend to."

She slipped a piece of paper into his hand. "My private number in Hollywood and my room number here at the Plaza. *Do* call, darling." She leaned very close and whispered, "We could take up where we were so rudely interrupted."

Then she walked away, smiling at the cameras, walking right into the sudden glare of lights. Michele Hartley was a living legend in a business that spawned living legends.

Clea spoke softly. "Shall we continue?"

Strange looked at her, a smile twitching at his lips. "Jealous?"

Her eyebrows went up. "Are you applying for a Screen Actors Guild card?"

He shook his head and they continued on their way. Behind them the actress was saying, "We're just good friends" and "He's perfectly *charming,* darlings, and so *mysterious!"* Clea gave Strange a knowing look as they entered the passage to the dressing rooms.

Twenty-One

"Stop right there," a deep voice said. A tall, muscular black man stepped out of the shadows. It was Joe Peerson and he seemed ready to fight. "The good reverend doesn't like to be disturbed before the call of his ministry."

Strange studied the fighter carefully. He *was* the man of the dreams.

"We want no trouble," Strange said.

"Go, then." Peerson's belligerence was formidable.

"Stephen," Clea said softly.

He touched her arm, but he spoke to Peerson.

"The reverend needs our help."

"He don't need the help of no queer-looking dude in a *cape*. Nor no white-haired bitch in a funny suit. Git."

"Sorry," Stephen smiled and started to go past. He ducked as the fighter loosed a vicious left, but he did not evade the right cross, which struck his jaw and sent him flying.

"Stephen!" Clea turned with fury in her eyes and blasted the fighter with twin bolts fired from her clenched fists. Peerson staggered back, the front of his ruffled shirt and purple suit in flames. He patted at his chest with frantic hands as Clea bent to Stephen.

The sorcerer sagged weakly, his body sliding to the cement floor. "Stephen!" Clea cried again, but the magician slipped into unconsciousness.

. . . falling . . .

. . . hurting . . .

. . . ribbons of color . . .

Then suddenly reality . . .

Mad laughter made Strange turn. In the moment, before he saw the source of the laughter, impressions and sensations flooded over him.

He was naked, without even his Eye of Agamotto around his neck. The world was black and white, without color, the drab, featureless grayness of dreams. Endless, rolling amorphous landscape blending into the distant horizon. Shapeless lumps protruded, like extrusions of mud smoothed by the wind.

The figure that stood on a slight rise was gray and black, with a bald skull devoid of hair or features. No mouth opened to utter the laughter. To Strange the entire scene was blurred and slightly askew.

The faceless creature's hands came up, held out before him. There was a shimmering of light and a gleaming long weapon appeared in his hands. There was a moaning in the sky as the figure brought the weapon around. Stephen Strange opened his mouth to utter a protective spell, but his movements were as slow as molasses. It seemed as though time were stretching and there was no way he could stop the killer. The silvery weapon's muzzle was swinging toward him. The roar in the sky grew. Strange's words were incomprehensible, garbled and stretched out.

"Steeeephennnnn . . ."

His name echoed and vibrated until the very sky rippled with streaks of white. The featureless killer was still bringing the weapon to bear, slowly, ever so slowly, but still faster than Strange's desperate incantation.

"Steeeeeeephennnnnnn . . . !"

The muzzle was almost there . . .

The killer laughed . . .

There was a flash, deep within the dark circle of the muzzle . . .

"STEEEPHENNN—!"

Red—a blossoming flower of red, with a white-hot heart.

"Stephen!"

He was in Clea's arms, lying on the floor of the corridor. Joe Peerson was crumpled nearby, his shirt smoldering. He wasn't moving, but there were figures coming with an emergency stretcher.

"Stephen?"

"I'm . . . I'm all right." He felt foolish. Downed by the fist of a fighter, not by the blistering spell of a great magician. With a wry smile at the ways fate had of humbling one, he got to his feet. Clea

was looking at him closely.

"I had a . . . a dream. There was a killer, with a long weapon of some kind."

Clea looked around. More people were coming and they were receiving odd looks. The dark snouts of television cameras were pointed at them and Clea turned, her lips moving silently, her brows down and angry. Suddenly the different cameramen were pulling the cameras from their shoulders, poking and prodding. Reporters and sound men were looking at tape reels and cassettes with worried, puzzled looks. Clea turned back to Stephen and pulled him along the corridor.

"I'm all right," he said. "This way."

Two more rent-a-cops, both bigger than the first one, attempted to stop Strange and Clea, and ended up opening the dressing-room door for them. The dressing rooms here were built-ins, not portables, and the walls were of cream-painted cement.

"Strange!" Billie Joe Jacks turned with an angry frown as he caught the red-caped figure in the mirror. "Now you two get out of here! Sergeant!"

"Silence," Strange said, lifting his hand.

Surprisingly, the evangelist did not fall silent. "Who do you think you are, you witch doctor? If those lazy rent-a-cops can't keep you out, *I* can! Billie Joe ain't forgot his wrestling days back home, no sir! Now you and your fancy Halloween suit shake a leg right outta here!"

If Stephen Strange felt surprise that his spell of silence did not work, he did not show it. He wanted only to quiet Jacks so that he might investigate what he felt was a case of dream possession. But Jacks was not to be silenced. When Strange did not leave, nor look as if he were going to leave, Billie Joe Jacks took a punch at him.

"May the good Lord forgive me, but—!"

Strange became two, then four figures, crimson caped and black haired. Clea, too, split and became four figures confronting Jacks.

"Aha!" the evangelist snapped. "A conjurer's trick!" He lashed out with a fist—which went right through the projection he was aiming at.

"We wanted to talk," all four figures said.

"I'll not talk with the Devil!" Jacks punched air again.

"By the eternal Vishanti!" the four images of Strange said. Billie Joe Jacks jerked as if struck by a live wire, but it only made him more determined. He threw his fist out again and again met air. He turned with triumph to the fourth figure—that one had to be Strange. His balled fist swung hard—and passed right through the dark-haired

vision.

"No, can't be!" Jacks said. "Not all *four!* One of them has to be you!"

"The twelve moons of Munnipor!" chanted Strange. "Surround this soul and isolate him from the dark powers!"

Twelve glowing dots appeared at Strange's fingers, three from each projected image. The images merged into one as the twelve dots expanded, becoming baseball-sized spheres that glowed with a cold white light. They orbited Jacks, who stepped back angrily. He snatched at one of them, missed, and tried again. The orbiting spheres moved faster; this time Jacks caught one, but released it at once with a cry of pain.

"They seek only to protect you," Strange cried over Jacks's exclamation. "Let them sever the control from Nightmare!"

"Nightmare? Nightmare?" Jacks batted at the balls, which were moving faster and faster in an intricate set of orbits that encased him from floor to head in a blinding ball of light. The orbits were so fast it seemed as if the balls were bars of light and the light spread, becoming an almost solid sphere of cold white light.

"No!" Jacks cried out and the twelve moons of Munnipor exploded away from him, dissolving into points of light which died out.

Jacks stood swaying on the dressing-room floor, glaring hatefully at Strange. "Enchanter! Satan!"

"Stephen, he broke the spell—!" Clea whispered.

"Corrupter! *Sorcerer!"*

"I *am* the Sorcerer Supreme," Strange said with dignity.

"Aha!" Jacks cried, pointing. The walls of the dressing room rippled, the mirrors cracked and crashed down, spilling makeup and combs. The ring of light bulbs around the mirrors exploded in twos and threes. The dressing room was illuminated only by the light from the corridor. "Begone, imp of Satan!"

"Stephen!" screamed Clea.

"Veil of Kashmurti!" exclaimed Strange, sweeping his hand across between himself and Jacks. A blackness followed, blotting out everything, leaving only nothingness.

But to Strange's surprise, Jacks stepped through the blackness. Clea gasped. The veil of Kashmurti was penetrable only by certain ways, all of them ancient and arcane!

"Leave this place!" Jacks thundered. "You are not wanted here!" He put out both hands, fingers spread, as if to push, and Strange and Clea felt as though a truck had hit them. They crashed back through the dressing-room door into . . .

. . . blackness.

Twenty-Two

. . . The blackness was netted with tendrils of pain . . .

. . . The blackness was threaded with filaments of pleasure . . .

Strange fought the seductive pull of the wavering threads and cried out a rune from the oldest book he had ever read.

They floated high above the auditorium. There were stars above and below, organized chaos. Lights illuminated the tangle of cables and the oblong boxes of the video trucks. People moved between them. The great parabolic dish antenna was moving slowly, in a precise path across the sky.

"Stephen! What happened? Jacks should not have been able to do that! Unless he had help—!"

"He had help," Strange said, shifting the spectrum of his eyes to enable him to see the radio waves pouring like a searchlight from the parabolic reflector. He reached out a hand. "Great silver shield of the Seraphim! I command you to deflect the beam!"

An invisible circle came into being directly in the path of the broadcasting signal, diffusing and deflecting it in every direction outward and upward, except in the direction of the ComSat far out in space in synchronous orbit. They would soon learn that their signal had been somehow stopped, but it would give Strange and Clea a little time. And even finding what had happened would not mean they could stop it. They might transmit the signal to another projecting antenna, but it would all take time.

"Jacks is an agent for the powers of Nightmare," Strange said. "But an effective one. He had surprise on his side."

"And considerable power," Clea added.

They floated down, became invisible and went through the stage door right behind a harried floor manager. Billie Joe Jacks was on the dais before eleven thousand attentive members of his burgeoning Temple of Light church.

"Change!" shouted Jacks. "In order to create that new person you want to be, you must hate the *old* one enough to kill it. Yes, I said kill it! The snake must shed his skin, in order to grow a new and better skin. So must you! So must I!"

His voice dropped to a more intimate level. "I want to change things. I want to see things happen. I don't just want to *talk* about them!" There was a loud murmur from the rapt audience and he let it die before he spoke again.

"What *single* ability do we have? The ability to change. For five nights I have talked change. This is the sixth and final night of the Crusade for Change. We have spoken of all the aspects of human and societal change and of progress—or the lack of it." He laughed in a self-deprecating way. "Many people have talked of changing humanity, yet nobody thinks of changing himself. Well, I have changed!" His last sentence was a challenging roar.

"He certainly has," whispered Clea.

"I have changed because you don't change the world without changing *yourself*. It has been said that not everything that is faced can be changed—but *nothing* can be changed until it *is* faced!"

The roar of the crowd showed that they agreed. There were occasional cries of "Amen!"

"We are *all* in the process of growth. Even a rock becomes gravel and gravel becomes sand. Sand becomes sandstone and sandstone becomes rock.

"What I have to say to you tonight is this, my friends. *Tomorrow* we shall change. *Tonight* we shall think what that change should be. You become a different—and better—you. You must find out what that different and better you should be like. *Tonight,* you think about that. *Tomorrow* you act on that thought. You *become* that better you. Do you hear me?"

The audience shouted back, "Yes!"

"Do you *believe* me?"

"Yes!"

"Do you *follow* me?"

"Yes!"

"Will you *change?"*

"YES!"

In a calm voice Billie Joe Jacks said, “Thank you, my friends.” He seemed suddenly drained, suddenly weak. His pale fingers clutched at the edges of the lectern and he managed a weak smile. The curtain came down to thunderous applause.

Alicia Jacks and a middle-aged man walked quickly out and took Billie Joe in their arms. He seemed on the point of collapse. Strange and Clea floated down from the shadows where they had been hovering. A line of rent-a-cops kept everyone back, including the many newsmen and -women that surged forward, but Strange and Clea walked through them with no trouble.

Alicia Jacks looked up, her face drawn. She looked years older than she was. “Doctor Strange! Oh, thank God you’re here!”

The middle-aged man looked up, frowning slightly.

“Doctor? What specialty?”

“I used to be a surgeon, but I’m not . . . practicing any longer.”

“Oh. Well, this man needs a specialist. His heart is almost gone. I’m Doctor Spicer, by the way.”

“Stephen Strange.” He looked down at Jacks, who seemed all but dead. He was breathing erratically, his face pale and wet. To Alicia he said, “Is he often like this after a . . . a sermon?”

“No, not at all. The ministry exalts him. He . . . he comes away excited, invigorated, except . . .” She hesitated. “Except since this crusade started. It’s all part of what I said before, him being different? I can’t explain it, but . . .”

“That’s all right, Alicia,” Strange murmured. He turned to Clea. “It’s tonight then. On the flight here I thought that this pentagram of cities was too small, and I was right. Think of the location of these cities . . .”

In her mind Clea saw the mental projection Strange made. A globe of the world appeared, and a series of red lights glowed in a five-sided figure around Charleston, West Virginia. Then another set of five appeared; London, Spain, western America—a perfect pentagram. Then another, larger, pentagram appeared . . . and another, one inside the other, layer after layer, with Charleston, West Virginia as the focus.

“It happens here, tonight,” she said.

“After everyone sleeps. It will start from the East, where they are already asleep.”

“But you severed the transmission!”

“Did I?” Strange knew that the technicians were used to various sorts of interruptions and alternate plans existed. They could reroute and use land transmission lines to get to another antenna . . . or a

dozen. Strange had perhaps stopped the message from being broadcast for only a few seconds—not enough.

"Nightmare's power is awesome," Clea said softly. "He plopped us both right into that blackness—and look what happened? Fifteen or twenty minutes went by, just like that!"

"We shall be more prepared," Strange said. "Nightmare must be defeated."

Clea shivered, but not from any chill. Dreams were powerful things. All primitive tribes believed in and feared their power. The strongest man in the world could rise trembling and frightened from a nightmare. They *did* attack when you were at your most vulnerable. How can you escape your own mind?

"Come. There is work to do," Strange said.

They turned toward the exit.

High in the metal latticework in the theater's overhead, a dark figure moved. A flat leather case opened and the sections of the weapon within were lifted out. The expert hands, wearing black gloves, snapped the long rifle together. At the muzzle end was a two-inch diameter tube a foot and and a half long. The man lifted the silencer over the guardrail of the catwalk and aimed it down at the figure of Stephen Strange as he walked along.

The marksman tracked Strange's crimson-caped figure, his finger tightening on the trigger. Just past that piece of scenery, just before the lighting board, there would be a clear space. A perfect flat shot, no obstructions, an easy kill.

His finger took up the slack in the trigger of the high-powered rifle. One of the killer's special explosive bullets rested in the chamber.

Twenty-Three

Stephen Strange felt something. He didn't know what it was. Just *something.*

The human mind is a more complex observer than we give it credit for. But if we go on ignoring telltale signals the mind soon stops sending them. We live in a crowded world full of poisonous smells—movement, sweat, the odor of fear, machines that belch smoke, factories that pump excrement into the air. Our senses of smell and hearing are overloaded. We just stop hearing the cars and buses, the radio next door, the fights down the block, the siren and thumps and rattles. It's easier; otherwise we'd be jumping at every garbage-can rattle, hiding at every squeal of brakes, running at every siren.

But beneath it all is the primitive. He never dies; he just gets ignored most of the time. We use him only for great emergencies. Sometimes when we are not looking he pokes through to say or do something that scares us or embarrasses us. "Was that *me?"*

Our eyes and ears and noses are conditioned to ignore. We see hundreds of patterns of light every day, hear hundreds of sharp noises and stealthy sounds, smell hundreds of odors, good and bad. It is the selectivity of the mind that makes a difference. Just as the eye of the trained fighter sees the slight drop of the guard in an opponent, just as a musician perceives the imperfection in a note, just as a cop smells fear in a suspect, the selective mind sees things that do not fit, that do not belong, that are different and dangerous in some way.

Stephen Strange heard the almost imperceptible click of the sniper's rifle being put together. He took a few more steps, disturbed by the faint tugging at his subconscious.

A click?

A metallic click? A piece of photographer's equipment? A strobe being set into the shoe atop a camera? The cover of a tape recorder being snapped back into place over a cassette?

No.

It came from . . .

. . . where?

From up high, from . . .

He started to turn. The dream was with him. He turned in the direction of the sound, his hand shoving at Clea, getting her out of the way. His other hand started to move up, ready to direct a spell. But even a spell needed a target. An incantation needed definition, borders, direction.

Up.

His eyes swept across the scenery into the dimness of the lattice of catwalks. Bulky lights were set in metal holders nailed to wooden railings. Cables were curled on catwalks, or ran down in thick black lines to the floor boxes.

Time seemed to go by with agonizing slowness. It was a familiar feeling, however frustrating.

Where was he? It? *They?*

A figure bent over a railing in a shadowed area near the roof. Something glittered in his hand.

Once again Stephen Strange attempted to utter a protective spell, and again he knew he would not be in time. Even as Clea tumbled away, startled, Strange knew that the marksman would fire. He saw the explosion of light and knew that he had failed.

Strange fell toward the littered backstage floor just as the bullet exploded against the concrete wall. Chips blasted out in every direction. The strike against the wall was the only sound. The silencer had been very efficient.

Strange realized he was unhurt, and returned to a normal sense. He looked at Clea as he rolled behind a pile of black cables. She was all right, but surprised.

All the movement on the catwalk ceased. The police, guns drawn, ran up from where Joe Peerson was being taken out on a stretcher.

"What's going on?" one demanded.

Strange pointed at the catwalk. “You’ll find a would-be assassin up there. I would imagine he is an expert, which means you are probably looking for him.”

The policeman gave Strange an odd look, then started sending men up the ladders into the loft.

“Stephen!” Michele Hartley ran down to him, black mink flying. “Darling, darling, are you all right?” She stepped over him as the lights of the television cameras came on. He realized she was upstaging him artfully. As she bent over him, he saw the effect of her low-cut dress.

“Thank you for your consideration,” Strange said and got to his feet. The actress patted him solicitously, then called out to the cameras.

“He’s all right; Doctor Strange is just fine!”

Strange’s expression changed to one of determination. “By the eternal Edora, sorceress of Far Kalisher . . . strike!” The lights blinked out, all at once. The cameramen cursed and set down their cameras to peer once again into their interiors.

“Not a foot of it recorded,” one wailed.

By then Strange and Clea were walking swiftly away. Michele Hartley ran after them. “Stephen? Stephen?” She saw them step around a theatrical flat and she hurried; but when she rounded the corner they were nowhere in sight.

“Where did they go?” she said softly. There was an edge of whimpering in her voice. She really wanted to get him to come back to her hotel with her. She knew she wouldn’t sleep well now. In fact, she dreaded sleep. When she didn’t do certain things, her dreams were bad—very bad. You might even call them nightmares.

Twenty-Four

The Reverend Jacks went on the air all around the world that night. People listened. Eager crusaders picked up the phone to volunteer. Money was stuffed into envelopes and mailed. Dollars, kroner, yen, pounds, marks, francs, lire—all denominations. Checks were hastily scrawled while others vowed to go to the bank or post office in the morning and have money orders sent.

Hour after hour, as the night moved across the face of the world the television and radio satellites flooded the air with the message from Reverend Jacks.

There were phone calls, telegrams, arguments, debates, earnest conversations with doubters.

"He's got something there, y'know. I trust him."

"Faker."

"It *is* time for a change!"

"Snake-oil salesman, man . . ."

"No, he makes sense."

"Boondoggle."

"Didn't you *listen?* It *is* time for a change. I'm going to sleep on it, and then, by God, tomorrow I'm going to *do* something about it!"

Night.

Enthusiastic people, thinking of bettering themselves, of bettering their society, went to bed, thinking of Reverend Jacks.

They dreamed. They all dreamed.

“Dark forces—!”

Demons . . .

Alakazar.

Tralucifer nexus.

Pelzarian, the elephant god.

The power of the mind . . . the untapped flow of energy that is the common mind . . . the genetic power of a million million *million* minds back through the eons . . .

Na-brashon trux Tropoconia!

Invisible energy flowing outward from the core of the exploding universe . . .

Time . . .

Enough time for eternity, and not a nanosecond more . . . but enough time for everything to happen.

Everything.

In every dimension, flashing outward from the unimaginably distant center of the universe . . .

Energy—energy to be used; energy to be tapped, to be controlled, and used . . .

Stephen Strange reached into the endless flow of energy from the beginning of time.

Nexus consanto!

Ridge-backed dinosaurs . . . methane . . . chariots . . . a fragile plane of wood and fabric . . . a goddess . . . an apple with a bite from it . . . a desk sign: *Certified Public Accountant* . . . Julius Caesar . . . Edmond Rostand . . . John Dryden . . . a Caterpillar tractor . . . Australia . . . Stanislaus Zbyszlco . . . asteroids . . . Excalibur . . . salt . . . a Yorkshire terrier . . . Hannibal’s saddle . . . Sir Thomas More’s favorite cap . . . an Iroquois headdress . . . dirt . . . diamonds . . . fragrance . . .

A tornado of things and swirling air and gasps of black vacuum . . . energy in a billion billion forms . . .

The phosphenes of the mind . . .

Stephen Strange drew from it all, absorbed it into himself, selected, distilled, chose.

“Clea,” he said.

“Yes, Stephen?”

“It is time to confront Nightmare.”

“Again,” Clea said, and Strange remembered.

By Oshtur’s fearsome visage, before which all things do shake . . . By Hoggoth’s hoary legions which bid the cosmos quake . . .

"To the killing ground . . ."

Billie Joe Jacks was wan and pale, his limbs trembling and beads of cold sweat on his forehead. His wife and aides helped him to the cot in his dressing room. Alicia blinked, her eyes unfocusing for a second, then she ordered the aides out. "Let him rest," she said. Then she, too, left.

A wan light illuminated the barely breathing evangelist. The door opened quietly and Dr. Strange and his student, Clea, entered. They looked at the figure for a moment, then Strange sat down. Without a word he closed his eyes and his invisible astral body lifted from the husk that was Stephen Strange's mortal flesh.

The astral projection arched through the air and vanished into the head of Billie Joe Jacks.

The faithful Clea stood guard, her feet spread, her senses on full alert, the guardian of the portal to the dreamland of Billie Joe Jacks—and the lifeless body of her lover and mentor.

On the nightside of the world, people stirred restlessly in their sleep. Their dreams were . . . different. They saw bizarre sets, like some surreal movie . . . great black reaches of space, but not empty space. *Things* moved toward them in the void—nameless things. Doors opened into their collective minds. Green-clad, a long cape moving in an unfelt wind, a tall unkempt figure told them things.

They couldn't *quite* understand him.

They couldn't *quite* hear him.

He spoke in a hundred languages, in scores of local dialects, in the voices of their fathers, their mothers, their village headsmen, their mayors and dictators and commanding generals. He spoke in the voices of their doctors and film idols and priests.

They couldn't *quite* understand him.

They couldn't *quite* hear him.

He murmured to them, his voice certain and persuasive. They listened, restlessly. The primitive subconscious listened and believed. With each conversation, with each belief, however reluctant, Nightmare grew in power.

Heads moved on satin pillows and Japanese head-blocks, on down, feathers, and foam. They cried out softly. They began to sweat. They grasped wrinkled sheets with desperate hands. Some awoke, staring wide-eyed into the darkness of mansion and hut, ghetto and suburb, sky and thatch.

As he grew in power, fewer were *able* to awaken. They dreamed of

long halls, complex mazes, tighter and tighter rooms, trying to run through gluelike mud, pursued by nameless fears. But they did not awaken.

They *could* not awaken. They lived a nightmare. It was endless. The only release was to listen . . . to understand . . . to believe . . . to obey . . .

And Nightmare grew in power.

Twenty-Five

Blackness networked with crimson filaments. The red lines grew thicker until there were black lines across the scarlet sky. A speck of throbbing light appeared . . . grew . . . and Stephen Strange exploded into the mind dream of the sleeping man.

At once he noted another speck of light. With disconcerting swiftness, the speck grew to a pulsating sphere of sparkling light. The globe of expanding light exploded with a soundless flash and from it rode the devilish form of an immense black stallion! And on his back was the green-clad Nightmare!

The green cape flowed behind and the dark baleful eyes glared at Strange. The crimson world swirled around them, the red shrinking to a scarlet net and the black expanding; then the cyclic growth returned . . . The blackness shrank to a thin network of intersecting lines across the crimson world.

Strange knew that here, in the dream dimension, Nightmare was at his strongest and he, the invader from reality, was at his weakest.

Nightmare wasted no time. The silver hooves of the ebony mount struck out at Stephen Strange. Here, in the dream dimension, his astral body was not invisible and invulnerable, but all too fragile.

Strange evaded the hooves but made no spell. He needed to find out more. “You could not keep me prisoner in the negative world,” he said to Nightmare as the creature turned his mount for another charge.

“But this is *my* realm, Strange!” Nightmare trumpeted. “Here you will *die!* You are not fighting one of my lesser creations now, Mage—

you are in combat with *Nightmare!"* His mocking laughter filled the air as the great black stallion charged again.

Strange again evaded the stallion's attack. It was not too difficult and the ease of it disturbed him. It was as if Nightmare and his ebony charger were only a diversion.

Nightmare had always been Doctor Strange's most enigmatic and most ephemeral enemy. He rode the paths no waking man could measure, to be seen only in dreams, and to vanish in a blink. He struck through the weakest point—the subconscious.

Time seemed to slow. The prancing steed moved in slow motion, Nightmare's long cape swirled in graceful settling arcs. The monster's mouth moved slowly, the words coming as an extended, distorted echo.

The subconscious . . . that dungeon in our mind where monsters were chained . . .

. . . The rusty doors opened . . .

. . . Dark things stirred in the blackness . . .

. . . A man in a medical gown and cap walked out; he had the face of Stephen Strange . . .

. . . *Me,* thought Strange, *the me of years ago* . . .

. . . *by all the gods!*

. . . The medical man, arrogant and haughty, sneered at the stumbling drunk who emerged from the dungeon . . .

. . . The broken Stephen Strange, the doctor who floated on the tide of self-pity and liquor . . .

. . . The surgeon held out something in each hand . . .

. . . life and death; the ankh and the skull . . .

. . . The skull chattered; the derelict Strange cowered . . .

. . . Then the Ancient One floated from the dungeon's mouth, sitting in the lotus position, but his face was that of a skull, for Strange's mentor had died . . . or rather, had moved on to another dimension, one denied to Strange . . .

. . . Mordo, his most ancient of enemies, strode forth, as arrogant and as powerful as any Strange had met. He sneered at everyone . . .

. . . Other crypts opened around them and other enemies came forth, but all wore the haughty face of Stephen Strange . . .

. . . *No* . . .

. . . A soundless cry came as dust on the wind . . .

. . . "Magician!"

. . . Strange saw the last figure to emerge from the dungeon. It was again himself, but the blue-clad, red-caped image of himself at one of

the most important and powerful points in his career . . .

. . . The master of the mystic arts, answerable only to himself, powerful and superior . . .

"It is your time, Magician!"

Strange stared at the figures, but there was really only one figure . . . himself—himself at a period when he had no doubts or fears. He knew power then and thought he knew the proper application of it.

He had seen himself as he was then and that had been the reason Strange had put sorcery aside at that time. He'd become self-righteous, which was possibly the worst sin of all.

But to face himself, the himself of that time, was not fair. They had fought once before, Strange's more certain self and his doubting reality, during the epic battle with Eternity.

"You are confused, Magician!" the other said. "By opening yourself to many realities you have learned that *nothing* is as it seems! You thought you could triumph—but you cannot!"

The other Stephen Strange sent a blast of pure force against him. Rays of light exploded, dissolving all the others. Now there were only Doctor Strange and his earlier, more certain, more powerful self. Another blast threw him back, but Strange rose above it with a hoarse cry.

"I can!" he cried and sent his own blast of lightning at the other figure. They were both bathed in light, battered by the titanic forces each released. The rocky landscape upon which they stood flowed like lava beneath their feet.

They slugged it out in the most primitive of ways, blasting at each other relentlessly. Yet Strange held his ground, though only barely. The bowl of crimson sky rainbowed and grew dark. The air was hot, the rocky ground smoking and slick.

Strange uttered a spell, but the other Strange countered it before it was even completed. The other Strange wrote letters of fire in the air, encircling Strange, but he rendered them powerless with a gesture and a curse of rejection.

They stood at last, gasping and staring, facing each other. The other Strange put his hands to his face in a sudden spasm of pain and when his hands dropped away he wore another face—that of Baron Mordo.

"Madness, Strange!" he exclaimed.

The universe fell away from Strange and he toppled into a swirling gray wind. His body stretched and grew soft, his bones softened and his control was nil.

"Madness!" Mordo cried. "Madness is chaos, the world inside out! Madness is your destiny, Strange!"

The universe was an endless dropping. Colors melted around him like ribbons, flaming after him as he fell . . .

. . . and fell . . .

. . . and fell . . .

. . . Someone screamed . . .

. . . The voice was familiar . . .

. . . It was his . . .

. . . He could not stop the screaming . . .

. . . *No!*

. . . *Clea!* He reached out in his thoughts to his acolyte. She stood like a sentinel only a few inches away, through the skull bone of the sleeping evangelist . . .

. . . *Clea!*

. . . *Stephen!* Her voice was faint but it gave him a marker, a milestone, a measure of where he was. He flashed a tenuous line of intangible thought through the void . . .

. . . Clea!

. . . Stephen!

. . . Her mind was a headland against which the sea of madness broke. Yet the madness plucked at his mind like the swift outgoing tide . . .

. . . The Ancient One, dissolving away, not in age and self-determination, but in senility and madness . . .

. . . Clea, a rotting corpse on the altar of a bloated nameless god . . .

. . . Mordo standing triumphant . . .

. . . Nightmare's gloating laughter . . .

Nightmare!

In a flash of incandescent memory, Stephen Strange remembered the ending of the titanic battle with Eternity, in which Nightmare had been but a spear carrier. The world had ended, when Baron Mordo's insanity had gone over the brink. Strange remembered the smashing blow of feeling as the lives of four billion people were snuffed out in an explosion that had obliterated the planet. Clea, Wong, sacred relics and humble stones—gone!

Strange remembered wishing he had been destroyed, too. Only his own powers, and that of prolonged life granted him by the Ancient One, had saved him. But for what? He remembered floating in the awful emptiness, amid the molecular fragments of the shattered planet, wishing that he, too, were dead . . . regretting the death of friends, the destruction of mankind's home, of the hopes and dreams of an entire race.

He realized then that he could not continue to go on bathing in self-pity, in self-recrimination. He lived . . . and he was the Sorcerer Supreme. He could not accept defeat.

He cursed himself for a novice then. He had remembered Nightmare's brief appearance during the struggle. He had journeyed to the dream dimension, for it was littered with the awesome remnants of every man's imagination and the raw material for endless dreams. He had passed through the galactic garbage and universal hopes of a race, careful not to make a misstep that would destroy him, for he was the only hope of mankind.

He remembered his resolve to hold on to sanity, for if he did not, he was lost . . . and man was lost. The creatures of Nightmare's domain had attacked him, but he had overcome them. Nightmare loosed a horde of demons upon him; knife-edged beaks and scimitar claws had struck at him.

"The dark forces gather, then die with the dawn," he had chanted. "By the light deep within me—*begone!"* Nightmare had made a mistake; he had underestimated the powers of Stephen Strange. Strange fought through Nightmare's bastions to confront Eternity and more by logic than by the mystic arts, he had persuaded him to restore the world. From the void . . .

. . . from the atoms wandering in the nothingness . . .

. . . from the rough clots of stone and shreds of gas, planets had been created, stars set afire, worlds inhabited with one-celled creatures . . .

. . . From the primordial ooze came advancing the multicellular creatures. Lightning struck the ooze and started life and there was no stopping it: reptiles and grass, mammals and primates, then *man!* The recreation of the world had taken place in moments . . .

. . . with help from . . .

. . . the Ancient One, now a part of eternity itself . . .

. . . a world restored . . .

. . . a mind restored . . .

. . . from algae to lizards to man, from stone spears to rockets to mystic sorcerers . . .

. . . sanity regained . . .

"Nightmare!"

The madness vanished; the veil was lifted. Strange stood on a spotless plain of white that extended to the featureless horizon in every direction—the killing ground. No cover, no weapons save the mind and the knowledge it contained.

And Nightmare.

The gray-skinned figure stood warily, his gray hair disheveled, his green cloak hanging limp, his hands curled and fingers ready for primitive battle.

"Strange!"

The Sorcerer Supreme smiled faintly, with the thin echo of ancient haughtiness. "Using my own doubts and fears against me was a good tactic—but not good enough."

Nightmare snarled and tentacles rose from the featureless plain in a circle around Strange, long colorless arms that sought his flesh. "By the Ethnarch of Judah!" he cried and the tentacles withered and died under his focused power.

Naked women sprang from the plain, coming up as featureless blobs that colored themselves into flesh and formed into women and broke loose from the extension. They all had the faces of a mad Clea and they attacked with shrill screeches. Strange banished the harpies with a gesture and a curse from the *Book of the Tetrarchs.*

He lunged toward Nightmare and the green-clad ruler of the dream dimension leaped at him. Strange grasped the other's wrist and the wrist became a loathsome tentacle. The gray face before him became a rotting reflection of his own. The green cape swirled around Strange and tightened into a steel cocoon.

Strange fought for air as the cocoon tightened. The moment he remembered he did not need air, that this was an astral projection, the strangulation stopped and the cloak fell away. But it had confused Strange; he could be hurt, he knew that, yet he retained aspects of his astral invulnerability. He had no time to think it out, for Nightmare drew darkness around them.

Twenty-Six

Everyone fears the dark. It is instinctive, Going back through countless genetic generations to the hairy, heavy-jawed near-humans that cowered naked in caves. Some of the sons and daughters of mankind feared darkness more than others, but all feared it. Unknown terrors lurked in darkness. Death, pain, embarrassment, and things too horrible to even think about lurked in darkness—*any* darkness: the darkness of night, the darkness of the closed bedroom, the darkness of alleyways and cemeteries and chill streets. Even the darkness of one's own mind held fears—that great hairy black monster penned in some abandoned, shunned closet of the mind. You only had to open the door and it escaped, controlling you, changing you.

Man is a predator—even to his kind, even to himself. Madness is deadly for it removes the strictures and restraints that civilization has placed there for its own protection. The beast moves within us.

Madness is a condition where dreams overflow into life—or life flows into a dream state.

In the land of the insane, the sane man is destined for extinction.

None of us are absolutely certain of our sanity. We perch on precarious ledges, crouch on frayed strings stretched across the abyss of certainty. We race barefoot along dark passages filled with tacks, certain we will not stumble, with the beast slavering behind us. Those who believe they are free of any contamination of lunacy are lying, to themselves or others.

You define your own sanity. The insane always act rationally, *always.* They proceed quite logically and ruthlessly and with great certainty upon the path they know is true—but their truth is a sham; their foundation is sand.

Nevertheless, every man has a sane spot somewhere.

Nightmare's laughter was a sour odor in Strange's face. His senses were assaulted. Nightmare's touch was acid fire. The air reeked of the stench of sewers. The sounds were shrieks, the tastes were foul.

Fear . . .

"Fear is the mother of morality," said Nietzsche.

"Fear is the proof of a degenerate mind," wrote Virgil.

Fear has an unusual power. Stephen Strange burst free, sending Nightmare staggering back, flaming colors and dripping stench, and blasted him with a bolt of icy flame.

Fear means you can lose something.

Fear whispers the worst to you and scampers away.

Fear corrupts.

But panic is fear on fire and Stephen Strange was not panicking. He sent flame bolt after flame bolt at Nightmare, keeping him off guard while he thought.

Could he defeat Nightmare in his own realm? Or could he hurt him somehow, seal him off forever within the dream dimension, and let the forces that were here, the ones that were pressing Nightmare out, destroy him? Or could he aid those forces and destroy him now?

There seemed to be no plan because it was all plan; there seemed no center because it was all center.

Stephen Strange floated in a windless sea—no transition from the confrontation with Nightmare. Dreams have sudden and unexplained twists, abrupt changes of scenery, linked only in the most inaccessible depths of the subconscious.

There was unlimited grayness and he was neck deep in smoky waters. What had Chekhov said? When a man is born he can choose one of three roads. There are no others. If he takes the road to the right, the wolves will eat him up. If he talks the road to the left, he will eat up the wolves. And if he takes the road straight ahead of him, he'll eat himself up.

"Pu-sarrumas, son of Tudhaliyas!" cried Strange, calling upon the wizard ruler of the Hittite empire. The waters drained away and odd black things flopped savagely in the receding waters. The darkness overhead lightened. It was dawn on the edge of the world. The sea was smoke blue, the rocks rough and new, the sand coarse and speckled. There was a footprint; it was not a human footprint. It pointed along the shore. Strange heard a plaintive cry. Perhaps a child, or a woman? Someone in pain . . .

But there is absolutely no inevitability as long as you are willing to

contemplate what is happening, thought Strange.

It's all a dream . . . but a reality, too.

Kismet is: what is written is written, and our destinies are graven on stone long before our birth. Protest is useless, anxiety is blasphemy.

Strange saw the stone higher up, partially covered by sand. It had his name, his birthdate, and another date: today . . . now . . . But Strange refused it.

"There's a Samarra at the end of every road," he said, "but this is not the end of the road."

The beach, the swelling sea, the stone, the lowering sky vanished. Strange shouted out into the darkness that encroached. "By the serenity of the Seraphim—give me a world!"

The featureless plain returned, only the sun was setting. A red-crusted sunset colored the distant clouds. He was alone.

Everything has its own destiny, Mencius had written, and it is not for us to accept our destiny in true form. Thus, one who understands what destiny means will not stand under a tottering wall. One who meets his death pursuing the path of duty has achieved his true destiny, but not so one who dies as a malefactor.

"I accept nothing!" Strange shouted, standing on the solid plane with his legs spread for stability. "There is no fate that I cannot surmount by the power of my will!"

"The arrogance again," someone said. It was the other Strange, recaped and in his blue tunic, his head covered in the skintight blue mask he had affected in those days. "You feel it, too, then? You *remember?"* The other Strange smiled seductively. "Join me. You are me. I am you. You remember the exaltation of power . . ."

And Stephen Strange did remember. Unlimited power, the energy of the universe, had flowed through his mind. He had been a god among men. Power became more addicting than any drug.

But weakness, too, corrupted. Power corrupted the few and weakness corrupted the many.

Responsibility without power is useless . . . and power without responsibility is madness . . .

. . . madness.

The other Strange laughed and gestured. There was a shimmering, a streak that split the air, opening to an unbearably bright pod of light. From it stepped Michele Hartley. At first glance she seemed nude. Her long hair was piled and yet hung long and thick. There were bright pearls in her hair and spots of softly shining light.

Her skin was smooth, flawless, warm. She smiled at Stephen with the knowing smile of a beautiful woman certain of her effect on men.

Her presence was an assault on his senses—all of them.

Her perfume was still subtle, yet all pervasive, impossible to ignore. Her flesh was the memory of all women loved, all women who pleased. She moved with consummate grace, unembarrassed and unashamed. He realized she was not nude, but rather clothed in scented air, hidden by swirls of sparkling fog. When she spoke to him her voice was literally a caress. His skin tingled as she said, "Stephen?

"Stephen? I'm here. Stephen. Don't you want me? You can have me, Stephen—just you. Am I not beautiful, Stephen?" Her arms raised toward him and she floated closer, pink and tawny, gleamingly perfect.

It was an attack, not on his magical powers, but a base attack on his humanity, his manhood. For that he did not need a protective spell, only determination.

"No." He said it with such force of will that Michele started.

"No, please, Stephen! Don't send me away! Please?"

She began to fade almost at once. The other Strange snarled and stepped back. Michele was transparent now, her expression frightened. "No, *please,* Stephen! He'll . . . I'll . . . Stephen, I'll *never* be able to sleep again! Please, Stephen, he said . . . he said . . ."

She was gone.

The other Strange laughed bitterly and his shape shimmered. He became Nightmare in a second, and continued the laughter. "You cannot defeat me, Strange. I toy with you."

His words gave Strange sudden strength. "Oh, but you *lie,"* Strange said. He moved forward on the featureless plain. "If you could destroy me you would do so, and be on with your plan."

"You cannot stop my plan, fool. The sunset brings sleep around the world and thousands—no, *millions*—will go to sleep thinking of the message Jacks has given them." He laughed again, the image of confidence. "It doesn't even matter *what* message, Strange. It is only in the unity of it! That unity will give me the openings I need. A sieve through the wall of reality! And I shall enter—and conquer!"

"Not unless you defeat me," Strange said softly.

Nightmare glared at him. "Worm! Speck of filth upon the bathroom of lepers! *Man!* You are *nothing,* an amusement while I wait!"

"No," Stephen Strange said very softly. "I am your enemy, the one you *must* destroy to enter my dimension. We must battle."

Nightmare sneered and a thousand women screamed in anguish beyond the horizon of the plain. "You are here, now, Strange. In my world. I rule here." With a gesture, the pearl-colored sky turned crimson, then became a wet pulsing cross section of a human body.

The plain rippled into organic life, sprouting odd vegetation and alien artifacts. Only in a circle around Strange did the plain remain smooth and white. Strange waited.

With a snarl Nightmare returned the bloody landscape to featureless serenity. *"I* rule," he said.

"No, you control. You do not rule. Given the chance, this dimension would cast you out. It *is* casting you out!"

Nightmare's eyes flared into exploding novas. The universe around Strange frayed, and broke up. He was tumbling through the starry void. Pyramids and pygmies capered there, too, turning endlessly. Puppies and puritans, startled lovers and frightened insects swirled around him. The elements of a complex world battered him, but Strange cried out: "Samsu-iluna, vizier of Babylon!"

He stood on the featureless plain opposing Nightmare. "It *is* casting you out," he repeated.

"I rule here!"

"You *did."*

"I rule!" Nightmare screamed. A volcano of light erupted from the plain, lifting Nightmare into the pearly sky. Fractures spread across the plain and pieces dropped into the lava just below. The green figure hovered over the topmost fountain of spurting molten rock and everything froze. Little droplets stayed where they were. The racing fractures ceased. The bubbling lava stopped.

"I rule!"

Strange smiled thinly. "Methinks you protest too much," he said softly. "I am more certain than ever. The dream dimension is casting you out, Nightmare. You are becoming too real for this spectrum of existence. It rejects you."

"Nooo—!" Nightmare's drawn-out cry whipped up a wind that tore at Strange's crimson cape. The green-clad figure of the ruler of the dream dimension melted into a bubbling puddle, but Strange sensed there had been no victory, and he was right. From the green puddle rose a monster, red eyed, fang jawed, dripping corrosive saliva and screaming madly.

The stench from the beast was overpowering and Strange clenched his mind to the sensation. The thing grew, scaly and powerful, to become a sort of tyrannosaurus rex, but spine backed and with more muscle in the forelegs. It roared defiance at Strange and lumbered toward him, its tail switching and its breath hissing.

"Oshtur and Hoggoth! Defend thy master!"

The smooth featureless plain before him puckered and a droplet was ejected from a little pinched peak. The droplet grew swiftly and

became transparent. Within it, an armored warrior sat upon a great charger. The knight punched the droplet with his lance and stood upon the plain, grown to full size in a blinking of the eye. The horse snorted and pawed the air, the lance came down, and the battle was joined.

The lance tip sank into the soft belly of the dragon dinosaur, but the long clawed feet tore at the horse, which went down screaming. The knight fell heavily, the lance twisting away, still stuck into the flesh of the monster. The great scaly thing stomped on the knight and the armor collapsed. A smoke arose from the empty armor and the knight was no more.

Trumpeting victory, the dinosaur ran heavily at Strange, who wove a spell into the air with his hands. The plain cracked and the snorting beast fell into it. The plain closed over it and was seamless again.

"Nightmare!" Strange called. "This is foolish! Let *us* meet, you and I, not our surrogates!"

"You ask for death," Nightmare said, appearing. He stood on a floating disk of gleaming metal high in the sky. He flew straight at Strange, the metal edge as sharp as an ax blade.

"Illusion," Strange said and banished the floating disk.

"Illusion," Nightmare answered and they were falling into a sun.

"Illusion," Strange responded, putting them back into the featureless plain. But now the area had dimension; it had edges. The sky went up and there was a roof. Shadowless light illuminated all. They were within a pale-gray box.

"Illusion," Nightmare laughed and they were face to face on a tightrope over a bottomless pit ringed with human skulls.

"Illusion," Strange smiled and the skulls spoke.

"Leave us," they chanted. *"Leave us! You are not of us now!"*

"Illusion," Nightmare snarled and transported them to the plain box. The walls shrank until they had to bend their backs to stay erect. Knives were plunged into the box by giants and blood ran from the wounds.

"Illusion," Strange said, and the box grew again, the wounds healed, the skies lightened. The six sides, floor, and top of the box became like motion-picture screens. On each surface appeared the two-dimensional reenactment of the various battles Strange had fought with Nightmare—battles in which Nightmare had lost and had retreated to his domain.

The green-clad figure eyed the moving images wild-eyed. "The past does not exist, Strange. Only the present—!"

"And the future!" Strange added. The moving pictures on the wall of

the box changed. They became reflections of that very moment, of the two opposing enemies. Then the reflections battled and in each battle Nightmare lost. One by one, the sides of the box went black as Nightmare was defeated and forced to retreat into the fragile safety of the dream dimension, pushing Strange safely out.

"No!" Nightmare screamed. They were alone in limitless black, with only the echo of all of Nightmare's final cries.

"Yes!" Strange said. "You are not wanted in our world and your own world rejects you!"

"No, it does not!"

A flash, a soundless explosion in the Stygian darkness, and Strange was drenched in pain. The Eye of Agamotto glowed; an ankh appeared on his forehead, softly glowing with radiance. The pain abandoned him and descended upon Nightmare, who cried out.

"Your world rejects you!" Strange insisted. "My world resists you!"

Nightmare uttered a savage cry and disappeared. There was a sudden stillness. Strange could hear his blood pumping and the air moving through his lungs; it was that quiet. Complete absence of sound. Nightmare was gone.

Warily Strange probed the dimension of blackness around him. Nothing . . . nothing at all . . . complete and total absence of life . . . It was the dream dimension, but it had no content.

All over the world, people slept dreamlessly that night. For the first time in the history of man, for the first time since the spark of intelligence separated man from ape, there were no dreams.

Strange sensed the wrongness of it. People needed dreams. Their dreams told them things. Dreams were the unconscious mind, that part of everyone that is primitive and simple and always totally aware; and that submerged part of the mind tells us things when our conscious mind is asleep.

"By Oshtur, I command the dream dimension to be created again! By the eternal Vishanti, I order the dimension of dreams to exist—but without the rule of Nightmare!"

The blackness lessened. A thin light suffused the whole area. A flower appeared—a face . . . a baby . . . a mountain . . . a glowing sword . . . a beautiful woman, then another and another. Gold . . . silver . . . the crimson glow of lust, the copper glare of ambition, the silver gleam of pride . . . a ladder, a cross, a star of David, an ankh . . .

Suddenly there was a bustling, busy, almost frantic activity. Stars glowed, sins warmed pearly flesh, hands stroked smooth skin, mountains rose, wide seas heaved. Phosphorescent dots swam like schools of fish through the chaos—and Stephen Strange smiled.

People dreamed.
But they dreamed their own dreams.

Twenty-Seven

Stephen Strange returned to the dressing room in the auditorium in Charleston, West Virginia. Clea looked at him, concern on her face.

"Thank you," Stephen said.

"I felt your call . . ."

"You were my anchor," he said. They looked down at Billie Joe Jacks. "He's dreaming."

Clea looked at Strange. "And will it be a nightmare?"

He shook his head. "Nightmare fled. I don't know where. The dream dimension vanished with him. I . . . I created another."

"We need dreams," Clea said, "whether they come in the night or whether we construct them with our eyes open."

Strange nodded. They went out of the door, past the guards and television people, past Alicia Jacks with her worried look that Strange smoothed into a serene expression with a gesture, past the curious, and into the darkness of the evening. No one saw them, no one spoke.

They rose into the air smoothly. The city dropped away below and became a blanket of glowing jewels spilled across a black carpet.

Tomorrow, dawn would bring the dreaming back. They would want that change of which Jacks had spoken—some kind of change, some kind of difference in their lives. They would hope for it, and perhaps work for it. Some would die for it. A few would dream of it.

None would remember the disturbing dreams that had set them tossing in their beds as titans clashed in a place they knew of and denied was there.

Stephen Strange wanted it that way. They had to believe—to *know*

—they controlled their own lives.

The two sorcerers flew northwest, toward home, toward the pleasures of love and the pleasures of the flesh. And when they slept they would not need a magical spell to keep out unwanted invaders.

There was only one last lingering thought.

Where had Nightmare gone?